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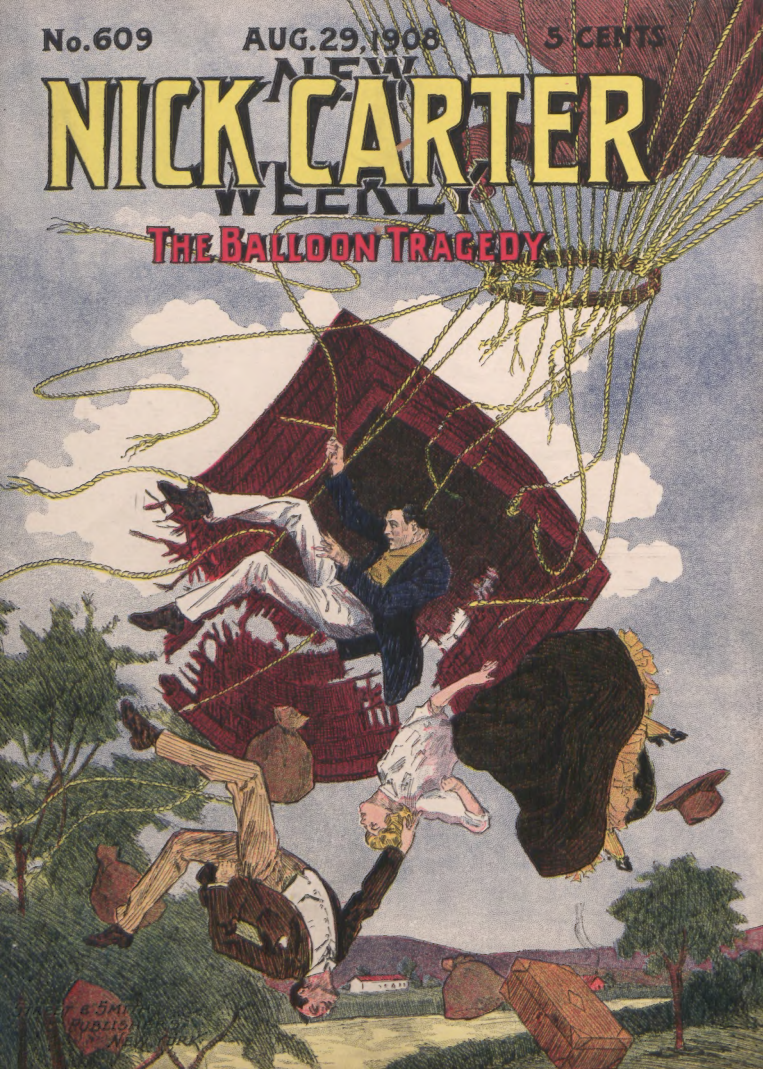
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE BALLOON TRAGEDY



NEW
NICK CARTER
WEEKLY

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The Balloon Tragedy;

OR,

NICK CARTER IN EXTREME PERIL.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE ESCAPE OF TWO BURGLARS.

There was a flash, a deafening report followed by a sullen roar, a shower of plaster from the ceiling of the room, and a blinding cloud of dust and smoke.

Nick Carter, who a moment before had stood facing a man and a woman who were known at the Hotel Mammoth as the Count and Countess Sachelli, and who had just announced to them that they were under arrest, was hurled backward through an open door that was directly behind him, and it was this fact, doubtless, that saved the detective's life.

The walls at either side of the doorway acted as shields for his body, and in the adjoining room into which he was thrown by the force of the explosion, the effect of it was less terrible.

The plaster did not fall down upon his head as it might have done in that other room, but, nevertheless, he was so stunned that during many seconds he was dazed and uncertain and remained where he had fallen.

Bray, the hotel detective, had been standing within arm's length of Nick Carter when the explosion occurred, and he did not get off so easily.

When Nick at last did struggle to his feet he discovered that Bray was lying across the threshold of the doorway through which he had himself been hurled. Blood was trickling from a severe scalp-wound, one of his hands had been cut by some sort of flying missile and for the first moment Nick thought he was dead.

He dragged Bray quickly into the room with him, and then out upon the corridor of the hotel which was now rapidly filling with excited people who had heard the noise of the explosion and had run out, scantily clad, to discover what had happened.

For the hour was approximately eleven o'clock in the evening, or between that and midnight, and many of the guests of the great hotel had retired.

One Abrams, a jeweler and diamond merchant of Broadway, had been robbed; that is, his place of business had been burglarized in a remarkable and rather original manner, his safes had been dragged into the

rear room of his store, blown open, and rifled of their contents, and the thieves had made away with about half a million dollars in cash and precious stones.*

But Nick Carter had succeeded in getting on the track of the burglars, and had finally cornered them in a room on the fifteenth floor of the Mammoth, where he had just announced to them that they were under arrest.

Sachelli was, of course, an assumed name; the real names of the count and countess, as they styled themselves, were Livingston Carruthers and Janice Carruthers, his wife; and the latter had been sometimes known under the names of "La Janice" and "Miss Maitland," for she had been an artist's model in Paris, and was herself an artist of no mean ability. Her husband was sometimes known as Peters.

Besides the four already named there was with them in the room at the time of the explosion, an artist and friend of Nick Carters', named Radcliffe; it was through Radcliffe that the detective had been enabled to track down the two offenders, for Radcliffe had recognized and identified a certain canvas which bore an important part in the case, as the work of the woman, La Janice, by which name he had formerly known her in Paris.

The two had been on the point of doing personal violence to Radcliffe at the moment when Nick Carter interrupted them by stepping into the room and announcing that they were under arrest.

The detective's first effort having been devoted to his friend Bray, the house detective, and finding that there were already many people in the corridor to care for the wounded man, Nick dashed back into the rooms after the other victims, for he had no doubt that Carruthers and his wife had also suffered from the effects of the explosion, and he greatly feared for the safety of Radcliffe.

But Radcliffe alone was there when Nick Carter returned to the room.

He was lying on his back, quite still; but his eyes were open and he was breathing, and it presently developed that he was really uninjured save for a few contusions and scratches, and about as bad a case of fright as the detective had ever seen.

Carruthers and his wife had, however, disappeared utterly.

Nor had any one seen them. During the short interval that elapsed immediately after the explosion and before others had rushed upon the scene, while Nick Carter had himself been lying half-stunned in the adjoining room into which he had been hurled, the two had managed to make their escape.

The only trace of them that could be found was when half an hour later it was discovered that they had descended in the elevator from the twelfth floor at the farthest extremity of the building from the point of the explosion—from a part of the great building where the noise of it had not even been heard.

They had succeeded, in the language of the underworld, in making a complete getaway; and not only had they escaped the detective, but the stolen cash and jewels were still in their possession; that is, it was not likely that they had any part of the stolen property at the hotel, for, had it been there, they would not have had time to take it away with them. But no trace of it could be found, and, therefore, it followed that they had already concealed it elsewhere.

Nick felt that he now had the original case of burglary to do all over again.

It was true that he knew who the burglars were, but the two had escaped, and it was up to him now, more than ever, to find them, arrest them, and to recover the property they had taken from the diamond merchant's safes.

Bray presently recovered and was able to stand upon his feet, although somewhat uncertainly—and he was about the maddest man in seven counties as Nick afterward expressed it.

"How did they do it?" he demanded the moment his eyes rested upon the detective; and Nick smilingly replied:

"Why, Bray, they merely sprung a trap that they had already set for just such an emergency. The woman had a small, thin glass bottle in her pocket, filled with nitro-glycerine. When the proper moment came, she tossed it toward me so that it fell almost at my feet. At the same instant she and Carruthers, who was waiting for her to act from the moment we appeared, both sprang backward and so escaped the force of the explosion. There wasn't enough explosive in the small bottle to do much damage, but there was sufficient for their purposes, for they made good their escape. I'll get them, however."

"Of course you'll get them. What became of that fool Radcliffe? He ought to have been killed. It would have served him right, according to my way of thinking."

"He escaped practically without injury. Now, how are you feeling?"

"Oh, I'm all right, or will be so, presently. My head

*See No. 608 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY. "A Woman at Bay."

is a bit dizzy, and this left hand of mine pains me a little; otherwise I'm all right."

"Then I'll leave you and take Radcliffe home to his studio."

"Confound Radcliffe! It is all his fault. If it hadn't been for his cowardice——"

"Never mind that, Bray. Radcliffe is an artist, not a fighter, or a detective. Anyhow, I want to question him. I have an idea that he has rather more knowledge about those people than he has hitherto admitted, and that now, after all that has happened, he will be willing to disclose it."

"Perhaps. Personally I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw a bull by the tail."

"You don't have to, Bray. It is my case, you know; not yours."

"All the same, Nick, if you are willing, I am going to make it mine, too, from this out. I want to get a week off duty at this hotel and help you with the case, if you will let me. I feel a sort of personal responsibility for their escape, you know."

"I don't know why you should do that."

"Well, I do, anyhow."

"Very well. If you can get a leave of absence, come ahead. I'll be glad to have you on my staff for a while."

"Thank you, Carter. I'll report at your house about noon to-morrow."

The detective assisted Radcliffe to a cab that had been called, and drove with him to his studio, which was not far distant.

There was very little said between them during the drive, but after they arrived at the studio Nick lighted a cigar, dropped into one of the big easy chairs, and, after waiting until Radcliffe had gotten himself into his inevitable smoking-jacket, said:

"Now, Radcliffe, I know it is late, and that you are not only tired out, but are also suffering somewhat from shock consequent upon the explosion. But all the same I cannot wait for the information I wish you to impart to me. I want the whole story of your association with that woman, and with the man who is now her husband. Carruthers, you understand, is the son of one of the shrewdest criminals I ever knew, and he bears the same name."*

"Yes. I know that."

"Well, Radcliffe, I want you to give me your attention while I tell you something. When I came to you about that burglary case, which of itself is now a thing of the past, I had no idea whatever that you would know, or did know, the artist who had painted the canvas I wished to trace. The canvas itself was of such unusual size and shape that I believed with your knowledge of such things you could materially aid me in tracing it. In pursuing my usual tactics of caution I did not tell you, at the time I made the request, my reasons for wishing to trace that canvas, and before you were aware of it you revealed to me the identity of the artist who had painted it; you did that merely because you recognized the work."

"What is the use in rehashing all that, Nick?"

"You will see, presently. At least, it is my present wish to do so."

"Oh, go ahead."

"When you found out *why* I wished to know about the canvas—when you discovered that the canvas itself was an important clue to one of the most daring burglaries on record, you shut up like a trap and candidly informed me that if you had realized what I wanted to know, you would not have told me; also that you would tell me no more; and also that you would, if the opportunity offered, warn La Janice against me."

"What of it, if I did?"

"Afterward you lied to me, and when I came here to tell you that I had found it out, you got angry at me. Later, you went to the hotel where the man and woman were living as a fictitious count and countess, and you warned them of my search for them. But you have discovered what sort of gratitude such people manifest. You have had an experience that you are not likely to forget in a hurry, I think."

"Yes; so I have."

"Well, I want you now, after what you have been through, to tell me all and everything you know about that woman. It is important that I should know it."

"Suppose I should refuse to do that?"

"I hardly think, Radcliffe, that you will care to do that. You will regret it if you do," was the quiet reply.

CHAPTER II.

JUST AFTER THE ESCAPE.

Radcliffe was silent for a long time after the detective's last remark, and Nick waited patiently, for none realized better than he how necessary it was to permit an obstinate character like Radcliffe to have plenty of time for thought.

"I don't know what to say to you, Nick," the artist

*See NICK CARTER WEEKLY, Nos. 607 and 608.

remarked at last, speaking thoughtfully and with perplexed brow. "You see there is much more involved in this affair than appears on the surface. I don't know whether I should tell you the whole story or not."

"Certainly you ought."

"I'll think about it. You see, I knew those people in Paris; both of them."

"You have already admitted that much to me."

"Yes. I know. But there was another person who was associated with them at that time."

"Yes?" replied Nick negligently.

"Possibly you may have heard of her, although it is not likely."

The detective pricked up his ears.

"Of *her?*" he inquired. "Of whom?"

"I don't suppose you know that Carruthers has a sister—or, rather, a half-sister; eh?"

"I have heard as much," replied Nick.

"Her name is Pauline. She was known as Pauline Mason. She is very beautiful, very attractive, and I believe, thoroughly good. At least, she was, when I knew her."

"Yes?" said Nick again.

"Do you remember that when you first came to my studio to ask me about that canvas, and when you had finally gotten enough information out of me to realize that I had personally known the one who painted it, you asked me, half in a joke, if I was one of the persons who had fallen in love with Janice?"

"Yes."

"I believe I told you that I *had* fallen in love with her, once, but that I had also fallen out of it again; didn't I?"

"Yes."

"And you heard enough of the conversation between us at the hotel last night to understand that it really is all over, didn't you?"*

"Yes."

"Well, it would be impossible for you thoroughly to understand why unless you also knew about Pauline Mason. A man rarely falls *out* of love with one woman until he has fallen *in* love with another one. Has that ever occurred to you?"

"Often."

"I fell *out* of love with La Janice because I had seen Pauline Mason."

"I am beginning to understand you."

"That was, of course, before Janice married Carruthers. I don't think that Janice ever really cared for me, but she was human enough to be jealous, nevertheless. She probably saw in me a sort of stepping-stone to the foot at least of the social ladder which she wished to climb, and when my admiration for her was changed into actual love for Pauline—well, you know the trite old saying about the fury of a woman scorned."

"Yes."

"Pauline disappeared, suddenly and mysteriously. Although I searched for her, I could find no trace of her. I advertised for her, but with no result. Then I applied to the police for aid in finding her, and the result of that was that Paris was made very unpleasant for the Carruthers, for it was at the time of Pauline's disappearance that Janice married him. Well, to make a long story short, they swore vengeance on me, and I on them, and shortly after that I returned to New York. After that, little by little, the whole affair became dim in my mind, and I had practically ceased to think about it until you came to me the other day with your request about that painted canvas.

"Now, here is the point I have been getting at: When I thoroughly realized what a hold *you* had over Carruthers and Janice, when I understood that you were after them for burglary and robbery, I resolved to turn *your* advantage over them to my own account. See?"

"Yes."

"For I did lie to you. I did know where they could be found. My artist friend *had* discovered where Janice was staying and he *had* had an interview with her, although I denied it in telling you of the circumstance."

The detective nodded.

"I saw in the situation you outlined an opportunity to use them. That is why I went to the hotel to see them and to warn them against you."

"I don't think I quite understand what you mean."

"Why, this: I offered them all the information I had, and promised to turn you entirely off their track on condition that they would tell me where I could find Pauline Mason and would do all they could to bring us together again."

"Oh; I see."

"That was it."

"It is too bad, Radcliffe, that you didn't tell me as much as that."

"Why?"

"Because I might possibly have told you something about Pauline myself."

"What? Do you mean to tell me——"

*See No. 608, NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

"I mean to tell you nothing, Radcliffe, until you have told *me* all you know about those people. From what you know about them I expect that I can get on their trail with a good deal less trouble than it would otherwise require."

"Nick Carter, do you know where Pauline Mason can be found at the present moment?"

"If she is the self-respecting young woman I take her to be," replied the detective, with a smile, "she ought to be in bed at the present moment."

"Don't dodge the question. Do you know where she is at the present moment?"

"No; not exactly."

"Do you know where she could be found?"

"Approximately; yes."

"Will you take me to her?"

"Not without first having secured her expressed permission to do so, Radcliffe."

"If she gives that, will you do so?"

"Yes."

"And will you deliver to her a note that I will write?"

"Yes; if you will take it for granted that before I deliver it I will tell her who it is from and ask her if she cares to receive it."

"I am willing as to that."

"Then I will undertake to oblige you under those circumstances."

"Thank you. And I will permit you to read the note before you become its bearer. Excuse me a moment and I will write it."

"First, had you not better tell me the rest of that story?"

"No. I will tell you all there is to tell afterward."

"Afterward?"

"Yes; after you have seen Pauline."

The detective frowned a little.

"I understand you now, Radcliffe," he said coldly. "You intend not to tell me anything more in case Pauline should refuse to receive you; eh?"

"Yes."

"And you hope by pursuing that course to force *me* into some sort of effort in your favor regarding Pauline, do you?"

"That was my idea."

"Oh, well, prepare your note. I will take it to her and see what her attitude toward you happens to be. But I shall make no effort to direct her reply to it. If she does not wish to see you, she need not. Write your note."

Radcliffe crossed to his desk and wrote rapidly for a time. Then he returned to the chair opposite the detective, and read aloud:

"'Pauline: I send this to you by the hand of Mr. Carter, who has kindly undertaken to deliver it. I have asked him no questions concerning you, and I have no idea where you are at the present moment. Will you see me? Will you grant me an interview? That is all I have to ask, and you may make the conditions whatever you please—Radcliffe.'

"That is a straightforward note, isn't it?" he asked of Nick.

"It seems so, certainly."

"There is nothing in it to which you, as a messenger, could object?"

"No."

"Then, if you return from seeing her and bring me a favorable answer, I will tell you all and everything that I know concerning La Janice and her husband, Livingston Carruthers."

Without another word the detective put the envelope in his pocket, and, rising, took his hat and crossed to the door.

"When will I see you?" Radcliffe called after him.

"When I return with the answer," replied Nick, and he went outside and down the stairs to the street.

He noticed as he passed out that a carriage was standing near the curb almost directly opposite; but he scarcely devoted a glance to it. Instead he walked rapidly away from the vicinity of the studio toward his own home.

If he had looked back, which he did not, he would have seen the driver on the box of the hack turn his head so that he could watch the detective; and he kept on watching him until Nick turned the corner and disappeared from view.

But Nick Carter kept on his way, and did not turn his head once during that walk home.

In truth, he was thinking deeply upon the events of the night. He was going over in his mind the methods used by the two Carruthers, in escaping from him as they had done. He was for the moment forgetful of the quasi defiance that Radcliffe had offered him—even of the man himself.

At the very moment of success he had been foiled, and Nick Carter was not used to being outdone by a pair of crooks. It was rather a new experience to him.

In the morning, after his breakfast, he went first to police headquarters where he related all that had occurred at the Mammoth the preceding evening, for the central office still had the case in charge. Abrams,

the jeweler, had telephoned there before he summoned Nick Carter, when the burglary was discovered.*

After a talk with the head of the detective bureau at headquarters and a short conversation with the two men who had been assigned to the case by the commissioner, he entered his automobile which he had directed should meet him there, and had himself driven to Abrams' home, where he knew Pauline Mason was acting as governess for the Abram children.*

But a surprise awaited him when he arrived at the jeweler's home, for Pauline was not there. She had disappeared from the house some time during the night, or early in the morning before the others were astir. Her bed had been occupied, but she was gone, and nobody knew whither. She had not been summoned until long after her usual hour for rising, and so the discovery of her absence was not known until only a few moments before the detective arrived.

And, although he did not know it at the time, another and a much more startling surprise was awaiting him at the studio of the artist.

But we need not anticipate. Events happened swiftly enough without that.

CHAPTER III.

THE PASSING OF ARTIST RADCLIFFE.

It was Mrs. Abrams who gave the detective what little information they possessed about the disappearance of Pauline. Mr. Abrams had gone down-town to his store before her absence was discovered and had not been informed about it.

In substance Mrs. Abrams' account of the affair was as follows:

"We had company last evening—just neighbors who wished to hear about the burglary—and they stayed quite late. We did not retire till shortly after midnight. Just before we went to bed, Pauline remembered the box of candy that you sent to her in the afternoon, and——"

"That I sent to her? But never mind. Go on, please."

"Well, she got it, and we all ate some of the candy. Then we went to bed. I, for one, awoke with a wretched headache this morning, and did not rise at my usual hour. My husband complained of not feeling well, also. We were all rather tardy about getting started for the day, and I thought I would let Pauline sleep as late as she cared to. But when it got to be so late, I went to her room myself to call her, and discovered then that she was not there.

"My first idea was that she had risen early and had gone out for a morning walk, the weather being so fine; but when she did not return, I began to feel nervous. I went to her room again, then."

"Yes."

"Then it was that I discovered that her large satchel was gone, and with it much of her apparel. Then, when I was about to telephone for my husband to tell him about it, you came."

Nick made no remark, and she continued:

"You see, Mr. Carter, since we have known that Pauline is related to the man who undoubtedly robbed Mr. Abrams' store, I have had my own doubts about her; and now it seems to me that my doubts were reasonable. She has gone without saying by your leave, but I confess that I cannot find that she has taken anything away with her."

"Mrs. Abrams," said Nick, bending forward toward her to give his words more weight, "I wish to tell you that in the first place I did not send Pauline any candy. It was sent by some one else, in my name. Therefore, since you have confessed to feeling badly when you awoke rather later than usual this morning, it follows that the candy was drugged. *Your home was entered last night by the same persons who robbed your husband's store, and Pauline has been carried away against her will.*"

"Oh, Mr. Carter, do you really think that?"

"I believe there is no doubt of it."

"But why?"

"Probably because her half-brother, whom I arrested last night, but who succeeded in escaping me, has been brought to realize that Pauline might aid in his recapture."

"Oh, I hope I have not misjudged the poor girl."

"You certainly have misjudged her if you believe that she has anything in common with her rascally brother and his wife. You see, they realize that now I know who they are they must resort to extraordinary means to escape recapture. They can no longer rely upon the concealment of their identities. As I figure it out now, they know of some secure place or method of hiding away from me and avoiding me, but it is one which is also known to Pauline. Therefore, it was necessary to get her away from you and from me, so that she could not reveal what she knew. The candy was sent to her in my name before I had traced them to the hotel last night; therefore, they had already determined upon their future course at that time. Af-

*See Nos. 607 and 608 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

ter their capture and escape, they simply carried out their original plan."

"But what do you suppose they have done with her? Oh, dear! Do you think they would hurt her, Mr. Carter?"

"It is hard to tell what they might do under the circumstances; but I think that Pauline, for some reason, is considered more useful to them alive, than dead."

"What a horrible thought. You mean, I suppose, that you don't think they would murder her, don't you?"

"Yes. About that. I will go, now, Mrs. Abrams. I will let you know when I get any trace of Pauline."

"I hope you will."

In his car, while he was being driven rapidly toward Radcliffe's studio, he murmured to himself.

"La Janice is even smarter than I gave her credit for being—for unquestionably she is the brains of the pair. But I think that now I can see just about how she has figured it all out. She knew early in the afternoon yesterday, that I had found Pauline. She realized that Pauline must be gotten away from my influence, and so she prepared the candy and planned the coup that was finally played to the end, last night.

"Then, when all that happened at the hotel, she and Carruthers went to that house, entered it without trouble, for the people inside were drugged, and took Pauline away with them. It is rather a wonder that they did not attempt something of the same sort in the case of Radcliffe. I wonder if he will talk now, notwithstanding the fact that I have been unable to deliver his letter to Pauline?"

He was silent after that until the car drew up beside the curb in front of the building where Radcliffe's studio was located.

It was then somewhat after ten o'clock in the morning, but, nevertheless, as Nick stepped down from his car he noticed that the curtains were still drawn over the windows of Radcliffe's apartment.

But the artist was known to be a late riser. He lived quite alone in the studio, taking his meals at the club, or wherever he happened to be at meal-time.

Nick pounded against the artist's door lustily, when his first rapping brought forth no response; and when a third and even louder summons met with the same result, he began to look grave.

His first impulse was to use his picklock and to enter the studio as he had done once before in company with Abrams, on the occasion when he made the discovery that Radcliffe had lied to him about Janice;* but on second thought he descended the stairs and from the doorway of the building summoned a policeman from an adjacent corner; and it happened to be an officer who was known to him.

"Cummings," he said, as soon as the officer approached, "can you leave your beat for a few minutes, do you think?"

"If you want me; yes, sir. But there is a patrol box at the corner. If you don't mind I will tell the lieutenant at the desk in the station-house."

"Very well. Do so. Tell him that I want you for a few minutes. That will be sufficient."

"And if he should ask me why?"

"Tell him that you don't know," replied the detective.

"Very good, sir."

Cummings returned in a few minutes, and together they ascended to the studio where this time the detective brought his picklock into play and soon had the door open upon an entry which in turn communicated with the studio, and the other rooms of the apartment as well.

Cummings was filled with apprehension.

He had read enough from the attitude of the detective to realize that they were on the edge of a discovery of some kind, and now he reached out a hand and detained Nick for a moment.

"Tell me, Mr. Carter, what you expect to find here," he whispered anxiously.

"I don't know," replied Nick. "Possibly we will find only that the place is untenanted. Its owner may merely have gone out without first raising his front curtains; but——"

He did not complete the sentence, but stepped quickly forward and threw open the door that communicated with the studio proper.

There was no need of seeking further than that act disclosed.

The explanation of the curtained windows and the silent apartment was there, before their eyes, plainly to be read.

Radcliffe was seated in the chair he had occupied when Nick Carter left him after their interview. Indeed, it appeared to Nick that the artist had not left it at all since then; as if he had been surprised very soon after that, and in seeking to rise, had been struck down before he could do so.

The chair he occupied faced the doorway through which Nick had passed in leaving the studio and

*See No. 608 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

through which he and Cummings now entered it; but Radcliffe had slipped down into the depths of it since the falling of the blow that had killed him.

For he was quite dead.

Indeed, when the detective touched him, he found that death had been present many hours.

The heavy handle of a knife such as Mexican and South American knife-throwers use in the practise of their art, protruded from Radcliffe's waistcoat almost directly over the heart. It would seem from that that death had been instantaneous.

No blood had flowed from the wound; that is, practically none, showing that he had fallen back instantly when he was struck, and had died without a struggle.

Nothing within the rooms had been disturbed. Everything was exactly as when Nick saw them last, as far as he was able to determine.

"It is awful, isn't it?" the detective heard Cummings murmur; and he replied:

"Yes; it is awful. I was here with him for a time last night. Doubtless, after I left him he dropped into a doze in his chair. The murderer must have opened the door stealthily—I remember that the catch was not sprung so that it would lock itself in closing—and the knife was thrown while he slept, or as he was in the act of waking. Then the murderer sprang the catch, closed the door again, and went away. I do not think that he—or she—crossed the threshold. I wonder——"

He was silent so long that Cummings presently asked him what he had started to say.

"I recall now that as I went out of the building I saw a carriage standing at the curb on the opposite side of the street. I was wondering if the murderer was not in that carriage, waiting for me to go."

"Do you think that, Mr. Carter?"

"I begin to think so."

"Then you already have an idea about who committed this deed?"

"Yes. A very definite one, too."

"Not from what you have seen here, is it? From something that you already knew?"

"Yes. From something that I already knew."

"Shall I go now and report the matter to the station-house?"

"Yes. Radcliffe's people live in Ninety-first Street. The address is on that card, beside his telephone. But you will not want to notify them till after the lieutenant has taken charge, and the coroner has been here."

"No, sir. But the coroner will want to talk with you, won't he?"

"I suppose so. Tell him that I will see to that, later on. For the present he knows just as much about the case as I do."

"But you know——"

"Cummings, I only suspect; I do not know. Until I do know forget what I have already told you."

"Very well, sir."

"Another case is rendered easier by this affair, but it is extremely unfortunate that Radcliffe should have been killed. If he had talked to me last night, as I wished him to do, I might have foreseen some danger of this sort, and have warned him. As it is, we will have to take things as we find them. It is too bad; that is all."

CHAPTER IV.

TAKING THE BACK TRACK.

And so Nick Carter found himself face to face with two mysteries which had developed that morning—the disappearance of Pauline Mason, and the murder of the artist, Radcliffe.

Of course, both were deeds of the same persons; and, of course, those persons were La Janice and her husband, Livingston Carruthers.

The question, *who* killed Radcliffe? or, *who* abducted Pauline did not bother the detective at all. The question that did concern him, and upon which he was puzzling his brain as he walked away from the studio building, was this:

"Why had La Janice regarded it as necessary that the one should be killed and the other abducted?" And to this were added other sub-questions, as follows:

Why had she taken the time that apparently should have been consumed solely in making good her escape, for such seemingly unnecessary acts? Why had she dared to sit in a carriage at the opposite side of the street and await her opportunity to kill, when she could have been putting distance between herself and Nick Carter? Why had she thought it necessary to visit the house of the jeweler in order to abduct Pauline, when she knew the detective would be hot on her trail?

"Why were the murder and the abduction necessary?" he asked himself again. "If I could answer those questions I would have gone a long way toward finding La Janice and Carruthers, for that the death of Radcliffe and the abduction of Pauline is directly con-

nected with the safety of their flight, I am certain. Otherwise they would not have lost the time necessary to have committed these two deeds."

The fact was that Nick had relied more than he had realized upon the information he had expected to receive from those two persons. And now he was compelled perforce to do without either of them.

He had himself driven directly to police headquarters where he was closeted for a time with the commissioner, and with the result that every avenue of escape from the city, by rail or water, was at once as effectually cut off as possible.

Men were sent from the department to watch each outgoing steamer and train, others were stationed at the outlets of the city where automobiles passed, and under one pretext and another every passing car was stopped and its passengers questioned; and this was continued for two days.

It was a source of great and continued annoyance to motorists generally and to some others, but it was accomplished nevertheless.

And without result.

At the close of the fourth day after the murder of Radcliffe, there were no results—save only the one upon which Nick Carter was convinced, and that was that Livingston Carruthers and Janice, his wife, had not left the city.

The commissioner of police did not agree with him in this idea. His own opinion was that the two had made their escape from the city immediately after the abduction of Pauline, taking her with them.

But Nick Carter did not think so.

His reasons for entertaining this different opinion were based upon the questions he had asked himself immediately after the discovery of the murder.

He was convinced that Janice, vindictive as she doubtless was, would not have jeopardized her chances of final escape by stopping to commit other crimes en route, unless she had regarded those further crimes as necessary to her plans.

Now, what could those plans have been which necessitated the death and the absence of Radcliffe and Pauline, respectively?

Obviously, Nick thought, they would be the enactment of some previously laid out scheme for avoiding arrest; for some scheme to be utilized only in a last extremity; of some sort of scheme of which both the victims had knowledge—knowledge derived from their former association with Janice. (Nick persisted in regarding Janice as the greater criminal, and the one possessing the brains of the twain.)

In pondering upon the matter he endeavored to eliminate everything from his consideration which he was positive they would not attempt.

One of these was flight from the city.

He did not believe they would attempt that, for the very reason that it offered many chances of recapture, since the police would naturally look for that very course.

Again, Janice was a person who could not readily disguise herself. There are people like that; people who, no matter how they may alter their outward appearance, will still preserve a certain individuality that is unmistakable.

Janice was one of these.

Nick could not believe that she would bring herself to rely entirely upon a disguise. She was too smart for that; too subtle.

She knew as well as Nick, how difficult it would be; and she would realize that Nick Carter would recognize her instantly, if he encountered her, no matter how thoroughly she might be disguised.

"If a disguise is the basis of her present method of hiding from us," he said to the commissioner when they were discussing it, "then you may rely upon it that she has gone as far into it as a complete change of identity. She has——"

He paused suddenly and half-started to his feet. Then he resumed his chair again.

"What struck you then, Nick?" asked the commissioner.

"I think that I have hit upon—well, upon a possible solution of the problem," replied the detective.

"What is it?"

"The thought that I just mentioned."

"Seems to me you have mentioned several since you have been sitting here."

"I referred to the last one I mentioned. A complete change of identity—or identities, since there are two of them to escape."

"Doesn't a disguise comprehend that very thing?"

"Not always; rarely, in effect."

"I don't see why?"

"Well, a disguise means merely that you lose your own identity. A change of identity means, or should mean, that you assume the identity of another person who has a past; it comprehends the assumption of a perfect alibi."

"I don't think I quite follow you."

"Well, if I, as Nick Carter, should commit a crime in Harlem at a moment when you, as John Jones, the pilot of a ferry-boat we will say, were known to be

on duty at the steering-wheel, and if to-morrow I should manage somehow to take John Jones' place at the steering-wheel—— You see the point now, don't you?"

"Yes. But in order to do that, you must make yourself so closely resemble John Jones that his associates would not know the difference."

"That is true enough—in the case of John Jones. But let me put it in another way."

"Well?"

"Suppose I came to the city a week or a month before I committed the crime? Suppose I posed somewhere as a character of settled habits? Suppose that character to be one whose habits are quite well known to many people? Suppose, after the commission of the crime, I return to that character and live quietly, as I have been supposed to live, that would be a change of identity such as I mean."

"It sounds to me very much as if you were doing that remarkable act that is sometimes called 'talking through your hat.'"

"All right. But I believe, on my soul, it is the very thing that Radcliffe had up his sleeve to tell me about."

"Humph! I don't——"

"Wait, commissioner; let me think a moment. I want to recall, if I can, all that Radcliffe has told me about that woman. I wish to recall in detail what he has said to me about her at different times."

"Can you do it?"

"Possibly. The subject was first mentioned when I took that painted canvas to his studio in the hope that he could help me to trace it. Now, what did he tell me at that time? That Janice had long been an artist's model in Paris, and as such had learned to paint pictures herself; that she had become an artist of no mean ability; that she had two passions: love of admiration, and fondness for jewels; that she was bold, resourceful, unprincipled, conscienceless; that she loved social functions and the pleasures that go with them; that she worships power."

"I don't see very much help in all that."

"Possibly not; but there is something there that seems to suggest an idea to me. Now, what is it?"

"She has proved her passion for jewels, it would seem to me, by the burglary itself."

"Do wait a moment. Janice and Carruthers were at the Mammoth as the Count and Countess Sachelli, of course. That was a change of identity, surely; but there must have been another one before that. There must have been other characters created by those two, before they went to the hotel as the count and countess. I think I will take a run up to the Mammoth, commissioner. I'll see you later."

"What do you expect to find there, Nick?"

"I don't know; but I begin to see that I have got to take the back track after those people in order to find them. I can't do it by pushing ahead."

"You insist that they are still in the city?"

"Yes."

"Well, perhaps they are; but if I were going out personally to look for them, I would begin on the proposition that they are aboard one of the two tramp steamships that left this port the day after the arrest at the Mammoth."

"Oh, I won't say that that is unlikely; but we cannot discover for certain about that until those steamers reach their respective ports, whither they are bound, and, in the meantime, I don't think we should neglect any opportunity for finding them."

"No; certainly not."

"And I do not think they will be found aboard of either of those steamers. Janice is too smart for that. She will hide under our noses."

"All right. You're the doctor. It is up to you, Nick."

"Oh, I know that."

"They got away from you once, and——"

"And for that very reason I don't propose that they shall do it again."

"You might begin your local operations by searching the pilot-houses of the Fulton Ferry boats," said the commissioner sarcastically. "That was the simile you used, was it not?"

"Yes; but I don't think you are called upon to be sarcastic about it, commissioner."

"No offense, Nick. I did not mean it unkindly. I was only making fun of what appears to me to be an absurd theory."

"Possibly it is absurd, but at all events I shall try it out. I am going to the hotel."

"And when you reach there——"

"I shall take the back track, as I said. I shall trace them backward, all the way to Paris, if necessary."

"All right, old chap. Good luck to you."

Then the detective hurried to the Hotel Mammoth.

CHAPTER V.

FOLLOWING A WORNOUT TRAIL.

The detective sought his friend Bray as soon as he arrived at the hotel, for the latter was again on duty,

although he carried one hand in a sling as a reminiscence of the episode with the "Count" and "Countess" Sachelli.

"Have you got 'em yet?" he asked Nick, as soon as they met.

"No," replied the detective. "It was brought back to my recollection a little while ago, Bray, that you wanted to do something to assist me in running them down. Are you still of the same mind?"

"Sure; only the management won't let me off. I tried it, but it's no go. If I can do anything here at the hotel——"

"That is exactly what I mean. I want you to put your wits to work and help me in tracing the two of them backward."

"Eh? Backward? What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I say. They were somewhere before they came here, weren't they?"

"Sure."

"And it isn't likely that they were known as the count and countess until they came to this hotel."

"I can't say as to that; but I should suppose not."

"Well, I want to find out *who they were* before they came here. I want to know where they stayed, and all that. In short, as I said, I want to trace them backward."

"It's a whole lot easier said than done, Nick."

"So are most things. Call the captain of the watch here, and let me ask him a few questions. He might be able to put us on the track."

The captain of the hall-boys was called and led aside. Then Nick said to him:

"You know who I am, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you remember the two persons who escaped from the hotel the other night? The two who were known as the Count and Countess Sachelli?"

"Yes, sir."

"Do you also happen to know when they came to this hotel? Do you know the hour of their arrival?"

"I do."

"Did it happen when you were on watch?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you receive them? Was it you who conducted them to their rooms?"

"No, sir; it was one of my men, though. A fellow we call Pinkie, on account of the color of his hair."

"Is Pinkie here now?"

"Yes, sir."

"Call him; and when he comes you remain near me and listen to the questions I ask him. If he cannot answer all of them, perhaps you can suggest some way to find out the answers."

"I'll try, sir."

There was no doubt about the correct application of the name to the lad when he did appear. His hair was undeniably pink. Nick asked him first if he recalled the two persons he was inquiring about, and when answered in the affirmative, added:

"Do you know in what manner they came here? If they came in a cab—or how?"

"No, sir; but I can find out for you, I think."

"How?"

"Well, sir, the big man outside—the one who wears the uniform with the big, brass buttons, he ought to know. He was on duty at the time. He is the one who calls out for the carriages of guests when they are going away, you know. He knows everything about——"

"That will do. Call him; or no, we will go to him. Is he outside now?"

"Yes, sir; that's him yonder;" and Pinkie pointed through the window; then he followed Nick and Bray outside, and the detective was not surprised when the lad volunteered to do the talking for him.

"Say, Mack," said Pinkie, "do you remember that swell feller that was here that was called the count of something or other? Him that had the black-eyed woman with him that was such a looker? The one that give you a dollar and me another one when I took his grips and other things to carry them into the hotel?"

"Sure, Pinkie; him that flew the coop the other night, wasn't it?"

"The same."

"Well, what of him?"

"Now, Pinkie," Nick interrupted, before the boy could speak again, "I will ask the other questions. You may return to your duty, and here is a quarter for you. Now, Mack, if that is your name, who brought those people here? Do you remember that?"

"They came in a hired hack, sir; one of the fellows that have their stand at Madison Square, I think it was."

"Would you know the driver, if you should see him again, or is there any way in which you could help me to find him?"

"As for knowing him, sir, I don't think so; but, wait a minute; it seems to me that one of our own drivers spoke to that one at the time, as if he knew him. Hey, Barney; come here. I remember now, sir, that it was Barney. I say, Barney, have you a friend

who drives a regular public hack from one of the stands in the city?"

"I have that, only he's me brother."

"Has he been here lately?"

"He has."

"When?"

"A week or so ago."

"And did he have for his fares a black-eyed woman, who looked at you as if she knew you, and a man who was tall and fine-looking?"

"Sure he did. Them that was a count and countess, I don't think. The ones what ducked only the other night when Mr. Bray here was tryin' to arrest 'em. Sure I know. Me brother, Tim, brought 'em here, so he did."

"Where is your brother Tim just now, Barney?" asked Nick Carter.

"Sure, sir, if he ain't wanderin' off somewhere with a fare he's not far from the main entrance to the Grand Central Station, this minute."

"Good. Drive me there and see if you can find him. If you do not, keep right on driving till you do. Will you come along, Bray?"

"Can't, Nick. See you later."

Tim was not at the Grand Central Station when they arrived, but he appeared in the course of half an hour, and after a few careful reminders he finally recalled the fares in whom the detective was interested.

"Sure, I remembers 'em now," he said at last.

"Do you know where they came from?" was the next question.

"From wan of the trains, I'm thinkin'," was the reply. "Tommy Limb brought them out to me. He's wan of th' red-capped porters inside. He always brings fares to me if he can, and I give him a rake off."

"Do you think you could find Tommy?"

"Sure. Wait here a minute, sir."

The hack-driver darted away at once, but he returned presently with the porter in tow.

"Here he is, sir. He remembers the pair of'em, too. He says they didn't come here in no train, but that—but you tell your own story, Tommy. The gentleman wants to hear it;" and Nick, after feeing Tim, turned to Tommy.

"Well?" he asked. "What do you know about them?"

"Why, sir, if they are the same ones that Tim means——"

"They are, Tommy; take your oath to that," said the irrepressible Tim.

"Well, sir, they came here in a hack that belongs over in Brooklyn. I remember remarking it, because I was that surprised when I found that they wanted another hack instead of one of the outgoing trains, that I looked at them, sir."

"You thought that rather strange, I suppose, eh?"

"Not that exactly, sir. There are lots of people that come here one time and another who do it only to put up a bluff that they got in on one of the trains; but they were so swell in their appearance that I wasn't looking for it in them. I helped them out of the other hack and then took them to Tim, when I found out what they wanted."

"Are you sure that the other hack came from Brooklyn?"

"Yes, sir, positive."

"Why are you so certain?"

"Because I know the driver by sight, and know that he comes from over there."

"You don't know his name?"

"No, sir."

"For whom he drives, then?"

"I don't know that, either. But say, Tim"—to the driver—"you know the feller. He used to drive for your boss before he went to Brooklyn. He lives over there. He's a red-headed chap, and he limps; one of his legs being shorter than the other one."

"Aw, sure I know him, Danny Flagherty. That's the man. He drives for Noodale, in Cumberland Street, over there. Will yez be wantin' to go there, sir?"

"Yes," replied the detective, "but I will take the subway to Borough Hall. I'll give each of you boys your tips, now."

"Thank you kindly, sir," said Barney. "I know Flagherty, too, and I would suggest, if I might make so bold, that you make some inquiries around Borough Hall, bekase there is a stand there, and Noodale may keep one or two hacks at it."

Nick entered the subway and waited for a Brooklyn train, which presently deposited him at his destination; and then, by good fortune, he almost immediately found Flagherty, the driver for Noodale.

So much time had elapsed since the episode which Nick wished to trace, that he had great difficulty in recalling to the driver's mind the incident in question; but he succeeded at last, and succeeded so well that the man remembered the occasion perfectly.

"Sure," he said. "Now I recalls both of them. A fair good-lookin' woman the loidy was, too, if I may

say so. It was a stable call, sir. It came in by telephone. I remember it well, now."

"Then tell me all about it," Nick directed him.

"I had hurted me leg—wan of them is a bit off color, sir, and it was that wan I hurted—and was taking it aisy at the stable that day. Whin the call came in, I was the only driver there, and the boss axed me if I could manage to do the job. I told him yes, and climbed on me box. But I wasn't reckoning for the drive I was in for. Whin the order came over the telephone they only said they wanted to be taken to the railway-station, and sure we thought it was the Long Island railroad they wanted; and it was the Grand Central."

"But where were they when they called for you? Where did the call come from, or, rather, where did you go after them, to take them to the station?"

"Magnolia Street, sir."

"Magnolia Street! Why, that is way out in Bushwick."

"Yes, sir."

"Drive me out there and show me the house, but when you get to it, drive right past it, only tap with the butt of your whip on the side of the hack the house is on so that I will know which one it is."

CHAPTER VI.

THE HOUSE IN MAGNOLIA STREET.

The city of Brooklyn is an accumulation of villages that have grown together in the course of time. Brooklyn, and Bedford, South Brooklyn, Flatbush, Williamsburgh, Bushwick, and several others that were once separate corporations apart from one another, grew together and solidified into one great city. But the lines of demarcation are still plainly to be seen if one looks for them.

For example, when you cross Broadway in the vicinity of Gates Avenue or Halsey Street, you come upon the Bushwick section, where the streets run off at different angles. In crossing that thoroughfare you really come upon another character of city altogether.

Parts of Magnolia Street are still rather in the country, so to speak.

There are detached houses there, with ample grounds around them. Some of these are almost palatial in their spaciousness, and others are merely old landmarks which are, by the way, rapidly disappearing before the march of progress in building.

It was one of these "old landmarks," since razed to the ground, to which the driver called the detective's attention that day, when at last they arrived at that part of the city, and he drove past it.

It stood almost in the center of an extensive yard which was overgrown with weeds and upon which it was evident that no care had been administered for a long time.

The house itself was merely a frame structure that had once done duty as a farmhouse, although it had the appearance of having been moved from its former position to the one it now occupied; also, it looked as if part of the original building had been shorn away from the main structure.

But the house was still ample in size, nevertheless.

A tumble-down fence stretched half the distance in front of it, and from the place where the gate should have been, a grass-grown path led to the high stoop which extended part way across the front of the building.

The driver obeyed instructions and drove directly past the house without slackening his speed; and presently, in obedience to a call from Nick, he stopped his horses.

When he descended from his perch and opened the door for his passenger to alight, he gasped with surprise, and stared.

"Faith, me mon," he said angrily, "and where the divil did *you* come from?"

"The city hall, wasn't it?" replied Nick, laughing.

"Is it dramin' I am, sor, or was I cross-eyed whin yez got into the hack? Sure ye ain't th' same mon at all, at all."

And the detective certainly was not the same man as far as appearances went, for he had made one of his marvelous changes during the ride, with the result that he bore no resemblance whatever to the man who had engaged the services of the ancient vehicle.

His hair was now as fiery red as Danny Flagherty's own; his nose turned up at about the same angle, for Nick had adjusted an extra tip to it. His eyebrows were shaggy and red; a bristling mustache of the same hue seemed to stick straight out, aggressively from his upper lip.

His soft, felt hat had been folded away, and had, therefore, disappeared and in its place was a time-worn, rather disreputable cap.

"Faith, mister," said Danny admiringly, when he was at last convinced that his fare was really the same man who had engaged him, "it wouldn't be a far reach for me to imagine that you were me own long

lost brother; that it wouldn't—providin' I had wan to lose, which I didn't. But ye sure have got me hair and me complexion, and if I may make so bold, ye make a good-lookin' Irishman, so ye do."

"Thank you, Danny," said Nick.

"Are ye wan of thim detective fellers, sor?" asked Flagherty.

"Yes."

"Faith, but I've wanted to mate up wid wan of thim some time; and wan in particular. Would ye be so kind as to be afther tellin' me who yez are, sor?"

"I am Nick Carter, Danny."

"Yez arrre! Moly hoses! Nick Caarter, is it? Kin yez prove it?"

"No; I don't have to."

"Faith, that's right, too. Yez don't have to. Have yez any orders for the loikes of me?"

"Yes. Remain here where you are till I return."

"By the powers I'll do that if me cavortin' steeds die ave old age while I'm doin' it, an' the bayrooch falls into utter ruin meanwhile, as wan of the potes put it wance."

Nick hurried away then in the direction of the house that interested him.

He had not much hope of discovering anything definite right there; and still, the outward appearance of the house suggested that it would be as likely a spot as any other for the fugitives to select as a place in which to lie quiet until the storm that howled after them had blown over.

Outwardly the house appeared to be almost deserted; but there were signs at some of the windows which told of some kind of occupancy.

Nick walked past it down the street and presently turned a corner; then he came upon the sort of shop that he most desired to see just then, a delicatessen; and a glance through the window told him that it was presided over by a fat and contented-looking German woman who had every appearance of being talkative.

"Howdy do, ma'am?" he said, entering. "Would ye be so kind as to sell me a few things to ate?"

"Vy nod?" she replied.

"Sure, I dunno. I'll have two slices of ham, a bit av bread, some of thim banes and wan of thim wooden dishes filled wid the chopped cabbage. That's the idea, ma'am. Faith it makes me hungry just to look at yer place, it's that clane. Would ye be afther tellin' me who lives in the house around the corner? the wan where the weeds is all growin' to seed. Sure they must trade with you, yer place is that foine."

"Ya. They buy t'ings mit me sometimes, already. De man he calls himself von professor. He vas make a flying machine, or somet'ings like dot, in de stable in de back yard already."

"A flyin' machine, is it?"

"Ya. When he vas come hier he had vorkmans dere all de time. He vas got de roof lifted off de barn, vonce; but he had it put back again, only if you vas look at it you can see vere de ropes und de pulleys lead from it to de trees, and von of dose vorkmans told me dot some day ven de flyin' machine is all done already, de man vas pull de roof off de barn and fly avay—scoot! Like dot!"

"Ye don't say. Faith, he must be a funny feller. What's his name, madam?"

"He iss Herr Professor Turner."

"Has he lived there long, ma'am?"

"Oh, ya; so much as von, two, three months; maybe more."

"And he works in the baarn?"

"Ya."

"Faith, mebby he'd be afther givin' a poor feller like me a job."

"Maybe so; ya."

"I'll ask him. Are there any others there wid him, do ye know?"

"Only one other. His vomans; his frau—vot you call it—vife; no?"

"Sure. That's it. Wife. Is she a purty woman? Is she as good-lookin' as you are, ma'am?"

"Ach! She iss alt—mebby sixty; Ich bin only forty, mein herr."

"Forty, is it? Sure I wouldn't take ye for thirty. Mebby she's the old lady wid the black eyes; hey?"

"Ya. Vot you call snappy black eyes; and ven she talks, it is mit a voice like the melodian in de back room, it iss so rich and fine."

"And the propessor, is he old, too?"

"Ach, yes. He has vite hair und vite viskers, und vite skin, und vite clothes; he iss all in vite."

Nick picked up the provisions he had purchased and left the store. Then he hurried back to the hack and gave the stuff to Flagherty.

"Here is something for you to eat, Danny," he said to him. "And now I wish you to pay strict attention, and afterward you are to do exactly as I tell you."

"Yis, sor."

"I want you to drive your horses to a stable somewhere near here, if you can find one, and have them cared for and fed. You can take them out of the vehicle, but leave the harness on them so that you can

hitch them in again at a moment's notice. Understand that?"

"I do."

"Then come back here, where we are now, on foot, and hang around here till you see me again, no matter how long it may be."

"I'll do that, too, sor."

"While you are gone, telephone to your stable and tell your boss not to be expecting you back again till you get there; also stuff your pockets with enough to eat so that you won't get hungry. The point is that I want you here where I can find you when I want you, and I am likely to want you at any minute after another hour or so."

"But for an hour you won't want me? Is that it?"

"I think so; yes."

"Then, sor, you can count on Dan Flagherty. Do ye want me to stay here in wan spot till ye come again?"

"No. Don't attract too much attention. There are no houses very near you. Nobody will be apt to look twice at you unless it happens to be a passing copper; and if one of them should do it, and ask you any questions, you have only to say that you are working for Nick Carter; and you can chin with him as much as you like, only you needn't tell him where I am or what house I'm watching, or anything more about me than I have already said."

"I'll do all that, sor."

"Very good. If you should happen to hear a whistle like this"—and Nick put his fingers to his lips and whistled—"you are to leg it for the stable, hitch up your horses, and get back here as soon as you can. Understand?"

"I do that."

"If the whistle is like this"—he repeated the performance in another manner—"you are to start in double quick time for the place where that whistle sounded; and there may be a scrap of some kind at the end of it. Have you got all that inside your head, Flagherty?"

"I have, sor."

"You will obey orders?"

"I will, sor."

"There will be a nice little fee for you to carry home to your wife after I am through with you, if you serve me well. I think I may depend upon you; eh?"

"You may, sor, to the last gasp."

"That's the sort of service I want."

"It is about half-past four now, sir. What time is that scrap likely to be pulled off?" asked Flagherty, with his eyes twinkling.

"I can't tell that," replied Nick. "There may not be any at all."

"Faith, sor, don't disappoint me. Sure I've got a game leg, but that hasn't spoiled me joy in a scrap, if only it's swift enough. You whistle, sor, and I'll be on time with both hands."

"All right, Flagherty."

CHAPTER VII.

A STRANGE INTERVIEW.

When Nick approached the house again a few minutes later, he was rather pleased to discover that the front door stoop was now tenanted.

A woman was seated there, in a low rocker, and she was reading one of the evening papers, as Nick could see as he stepped through the gateway and approached her up the grass-grown path.

She heard his approaching step, but she raised only her eyes as she looked at him keenly; and as Nick drew nearer he could almost have sworn that they were the black eyes of La Janice, although there was absolutely nothing else about the face to suggest the thought.

Nick saw that one of her hands, which had been holding the paper, dropped to her side and lost itself in the folds of her dress, and he had no doubt that it clasped upon the butt of a revolver.

However, she made no other move to demonstrate the fact that she was aware of his presence, save that she never took her keen eyes from his face.

He touched his cap respectfully and stopped beneath the railing of the stoop, looking up at her. His own eyes were exactly on a level with the flooring of the stoop.

"I'm lookin' for worrrk, ma'am," he said laconically.

"There is none here," she replied; and again Nick felt that he was almost sure of the identity of the woman; but he was not *quite* sure. If she were La Janice, then she was certainly an adept at the two arts of disguising her appearance and her voice. He felt that he must be absolutely certain before he made any break.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said; and he turned away as if to leave her; then stopped and faced her again.

"May I say something to ye, ma'am?" he asked.

"Sure I don't want to impose upon yer goodness, but——"

"What do you wish to say to me?" she interrupted him, but apparently without interest.

"Sure, ma'am, I've been hearin' down at the corner that yer husband is a professor of aeronautics, and that was why I applied here for worrrk, thinkin' that mebby he'd be afther wantin' a hand, and bein' as I know something about that kind of worrrk. They told me that he was afther makin' a flying machine, and bein' that I have been in a good many of 'em——"

He stopped, and the woman did not answer at once.

Then, just as she seemed on the point of doing so, the house-door opened and a man, who answered in every way to the description given of him by the German woman, came out upon the narrow stoop.

He stopped stock-still when he saw Nick; then he turned an inquiring glance toward his wife.

She nodded toward him and then began a series of rapid gestures and signs with her fingers which Nick interpreted correctly as the deaf and dumb alphabet, and which he read with perfect ease.

This was an extremely interesting fact to him, as well as the few others that had attracted his attention already; but he made no sign that he comprehended it, or understood what they were talking about.

Nor did the woman reveal anything in her deaf and dumb language which was not in perfect keeping with the situation. Truly, if the two were Carruthers and his wife, of which idea the detective was by no means certain, although he suspected it, they were a wary pair.

The woman merely told her husband, by signs, what Nick had already said to her; and then began a series of pantomimic gestures which Nick found exceedingly interesting.

Not once while the talk lasted did either the woman or the man betray by a gesture or a word spelled or uttered, that they might not be what they seemed to be.

Not once did the man appear to hear a word that was said, although he kept his eyes fixed sharply upon Nick when the latter was speaking, just as a deaf man would do.

In the beginning the woman turned again to Nick, and said:

"My husband is deaf and dumb. I will tell him what you have said."

Then she made rapid signs to which the man replied, and so they talked together by signs for some time, all of which Nick read perfectly well, although he did not let them guess that fact.

When she addressed Nick again, she said:

"My husband tells me that he is very much in need of a workman who understands something about balloons and aeronautics generally. You say that you do so?"

"No, ma'am; not exactly that. I have ridden in them, though, and worked around them in time gone by so that I know something about them, and so that I could make myself handy, I think."

She repeated this to the man in finger-talk; then she said:

"He tells me that perhaps he could make use of you if you would be faithful."

"Sure, I'd be that, ma'am, if I only had the chance."

"He would not wish you to go about telling what you had seen here, or what he was doing."

"Faith, I wouldn't do that, either."

"And how much pay would you require?"

"As much as he's willin' to give, ma'am. If it ain't too small, I'll let him fix that part of it. It's the job I'm afther."

"Where do you live? Anywhere near here?"

"No. Over in New York."

"If you are engaged to work here, you will be required to remain here all the time as long as the employment lasts. You would not be expected to go away at all until the end of your engagement."

"Faith, that's agreeable, too."

"Are you married?"

"I'm a widower, ma'am."

"Any children?"

"No, ma'am."

"Any one at your home who would expect you to return, or anything like that? In short, is there any reason why you could not remain here right now if my husband should engage you?"

"None whatever."

"Will you do exactly as you are told?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What is your name?"

"Well, ma'am, I like to be called Micky, for short; but you can tack Flagherty onto that if you're so minded."

There was another long finger-conversation after that, all of which Nick read perfectly well. And he was puzzled to understand why they carried the play to such a perfect completeness if they were not what they seemed. It was only that fact that kept him from being perfectly satisfied they were the people he sought.

"If the man *is* Carruthers, and the woman *is* La

Janice," was his thought, "they certainly play the game well. They are acting on the principle that I may not be what I seem, and that in case I am not, I will discover nothing whatever."

Presently the woman addressed Nick again.

"My husband will engage your services, Micky," she said. "He will need you only a week or two; no more, if you care to take a job for that length of time."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You may come here in the morning at seven o'clock. It is too late to start you in to-night."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You can get a place to sleep for to-night somewhere near here, can't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"If you have not money enough for that, why I will——"

"Thank you, ma'am, but I've got enough for that."

"You may come to-morrow morning at seven o'clock, then, if that is satisfactory."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And, after that, you will sleep here until your engagement is finished."

"Very well, ma'am."

"That is all, I think."

Nick touched his cap again and turned away; and he passed down the path and out through the gateway without turning his head, although he would have liked very much to look back at them, for he felt convinced that they were already exchanging low-toned conversation.

Notwithstanding the fact that they had played their parts so perfectly, he felt perfectly sure that the man could talk and hear as well as the woman could.

But Nick's services had been engaged.

He was to report for work at seven in the morning; and while he was not yet positive that the two were Carruthers and Janice, he was well enough satisfied concerning it to play the game at least for a day, to find out.

He turned toward the quarter in which he had left Flagherty, and two blocks away he met him, returning.

"Turn about, Dan," he called to him before they had quite come together. "Turn around and walk the other way. Turn the first corner you come to, and then wait for me. I have something to say to you."

A moment later, when they were side by side he said to the driver:

"Things have taken a turn, Dan, since I left you. I have new orders for you."

"All right, sor."

"You may get your horses and drive them back to your own stable. Put them up for the night, and go to bed yourself. But in the morning come out here again, and do then just as I told you a little while ago, to do now. Understand?"

"Yes, sor."

"Be here at seven o'clock, ready for business."

"I'll do that same."

"You probably won't see me. I'll be at work in the stable behind that house—you know."

"Yes."

"After that you must be on deck all the time until I want you. Whether you see me or not, you are just to carry out the directions you have already received."

"I understand, sor."

"Here is some money as an earnest of what I will do for you later on."

"You don't want me any more to-night, then, sor?"

"No."

"Not even to ride back with me?"

"No. I shall remain somewhere in the neighborhood for the night. And remember, you will not see me in the morning, but you are to be here at seven, just the same. Put your horses up where they will be cared for and where you can get them quickly, when they are wanted."

"Sure I have found just the place; it's near-by, too."

"All the better. And, Dan, you may be as much as twenty-four hours on the watch without any sleep. Do you think you can stand it?"

"Sure I can."

"I don't think it will be longer than that. I don't think it will be nearly as long; but be prepared for whatever may come."

"I'll not fail you, sor. I'll not fail you," was the reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER IN EXTREME PERIL.

It was exactly seven o'clock the following morning when Nick Carter walked through the gateway and entered the yard where he had held the strange interview the preceding evening. He had passed the night in a room that he found in a house near-by where there was a sign out "Rooms and Day Board;" for he wished to be as particular about preserving the appearance of the character he was filling, as he believed the people who lived in that house were.

The woman came out of the door at the same in-

stant that Nick entered at the gate, as if she had been watching for him; and she descended the steps to the ground and motioned to him to follow her.

Then, without a word, she led the way around the house and toward the stable which was at least a hundred feet to the rear.

She walked with a decided limp; and if it were feigned, it was so real in appearance as to represent splendidly the real thing.

Janice had no limp in her walk; that was certain.

This woman had one; but whether real or assumed, Nick could not at the moment determine.

Arrived at the wide door of the barn, she paused and rapped upon it; and then pulled a string which hung outside, being passed through a hole that had been bored in the door.

There was a short interval and then a small door, set into the larger one, was opened suddenly outward, and the woman stepped back and signed for Nick to pass through.

He did so, and instantly the small door closed and clicked behind him, leaving the woman on the outside.

As for Nick, he was in utter darkness; but at once he felt the pressure of a hand upon his arm, and he was led a few steps forward when a second door opened and they passed into the real interior of the barn.

It was about thirty feet square, possibly more. He only guessed at it.

It was brilliantly lighted by incandescent electric lights of which there were very many.

Above his head, pendent from the rafters of the building, was a myriad of small ropes, and these in turn supported what Nick at once knew to be the huge gas-bag of a balloon, which, not being inflated, hung in many folds, resting upon the supporting ropes.

Around it, inside the ropes, or, rather, above them, was the regular net-work of the balloon, and, indeed, it looked to Nick as if that part of the affair were ready to inflate and soar away the moment it could be released.

And in regard to that he had taken notice as he approached the barn of the guy-ropes and tackle the German woman had spoken about.

Inside the building he understood their significance better.

He saw by the arrangement that the roof of the building had been so arranged that it could be instantly thrown wide open at the peak; that the ridge pole could be cast aside by the same motion, and then the balloon would be free to inflation, and to soar as soon as the great bag was filled.

It was an ingenious contrivance, and Nick could not but admire the completeness of it.

All that was needed to drive the balloon toward the interior of the country, was a strong east wind, and that was likely to come at any time.

The part of the contrivance that was unfinished appeared to be the basket, as far as he was able to determine; but it developed later that there was still some sewing and pasting to do.

The detective comprehended all this in a glance; then he turned to face the man beside him.

It was the same old man, all in white, who had appeared on the stoop of the house the preceding evening; and he was staring intently into the face of the detective when it was turned toward him.

After a moment he began to make rapid signs in the deaf and dumb alphabet; but Nick only stared, uncomprehendingly. Then he pointed toward the balloon and made the motion of sewing; and Nick nodded.

Then he took a pad of paper and a pencil, and wrote rapidly:

"Can you handle tools as well as a needle?"

"Yes," Nick wrote underneath the question; and then the man wrote:

"I will set you to work on the basket, for the present;" and Nick nodded.

It is not necessary to describe the work that Nick was directed to do that day.

His "boss" directed him carefully in everything that was required of him, and they worked in a silence that was literally oppressive.

To overcome the effect of it the detective whistled airs from the operas, topical songs, and occasionally sang aloud; but to all of this the other seemed to pay no attention.

"Truly," Nick thought, "if he is not really deaf, he plays the part wonderfully."

At midday there was a rap at the door, and Nick glanced quickly toward his companion to see if he noticed it; but if he did he made no sign, and a moment later a white cloth that was evidently attached to the string that passed through the outer door, was raised a few feet from the floor and dropped again.

The seemingly old man saw that and hurried from the room, motioning to Nick to remain where he was; and presently returned again bearing a basket in which was food and drink.

He motioned to Nick to help himself, having placed the basket on the bench, and then hurried out of the building, locking doors after him as Nick could plainly hear.

Now was the moment when Nick could have made a more careful examination of things in the barn had he cared to do so; but he reasoned that he did not know what eyes might be upon him, peering through hidden holes; and so he helped himself to food from the basket, and in every way conducted himself as if he had not a thought save to do as he had been told.

At the end of an hour the man returned, and the employment of the afternoon was practically the same as it had been in the morning.

Whenever his companion had a direction to give Nick, he wrote it on the pad of paper; and the work continued in silence save for the noises made by the tools.

Evening approached, and at last they knocked off work. Then the man wrote upon a slip of paper:

"Wait here until I bring you your dinner;" and when Nick nodded in reply to the command, the balloon-maker passed out of the building, locking the doors after him as he had done at noon.

It was a good dinner that the seeming old man brought to him, too.

There were chops and green peas, and corn and potatoes, coffee and bread, and an abundance of each of them.

Nick was hungry, and he ate heartily, while all the time the man stood near, watching him.

The detective finally reached out his hand for the pad, and wrote:

"Why don't you eat dinner, too?" And in reply the man scribbled:

"I will wait till you are through, to take the dishes back."

Then it dawned upon the detective that he was not expected to leave the barn again until his season of employment was over; and he asked for the pad once more.

"Don't you want me to go outside to-night?" he wrote.

"No," was the laconic reply.

"Have I got to remain a prisoner here as long as I work for you?" was the next question.

"Yes."

"Then you've got to let me smoke in here. If you do that I'm satisfied," was Nick's next writing, done to be thoroughly in keeping with his character.

For reply the man smiled; then he crossed the room and opened a small door, pointing inside, into a closet-like place where some robes and blankets and a pillow were placed upon a sort of cot that almost filled the space.

Nick rose and crossed to the little door, and, as he reached it, the man handed him a cigar, at the same time gently pushing him inside the place; but the moment Nick had passed through into it, the door closed with a snap, and he realized that he had been locked in.

For a moment he was very angry; then he laughed aloud.

"What's the use of objecting?" he asked himself silently. "I may as well play the game to the end, and probably I can get out of here if I try."

Being rather tired, for he was unaccustomed to the sort of work he had been doing, he stretched himself upon the narrow couch; but he did not at once light the cigar, for suddenly he felt unaccountably drowsy.

For a moment he struggled with it, and then, with a bound, he started to his feet.

It had suddenly come upon him that he had been drugged; that some subtle substance had been mixed with the food he had eaten.

He reached out for the door that had been locked against him, but even as he did so, everything became black around him.

This was due partly to the drug and partly to the fact that at that instant the electric lights were extinguished and thus made the darkness real.

But the drug, whatever it was, was getting in its work.

He had barely sense enough left to him to stagger back to the couch and throw himself upon it, before he was unable to move; but his senses remained clear, for all that; and the fact brought back to his mind an experience he had once passed through with Carruthers, when that man had drugged him with a paralyzing mixture that had deprived him of all power of motion.* Pauline had saved him then, but Pauline was not near now, to render aid.

For a time he struggled against the influence of the drug, but gradually sleep overcame him.

Before it quite did so, however, he was able to do some connected thinking, and he argued that if he were only left alone till he awakened naturally in the morning, no harm could come of what had happened.

When he thought of it he was rather glad that he had been locked inside the little room, for it diminished the chances that his employer would become curious and watch over him, or examine him more at-

*See No. 607 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

tentively and thus discover the fact that Nick wore a disguise.

Thinking thus, he lost consciousness in heavy sleep.

How long a time he slept he had no idea, but consciousness did return to him finally, and with it came the realization that he was not alone.

Fortunately he did not stir or otherwise announce the fact that he was aware of what was going on around him, and it was evident that the others near him did not know it.

They were talking together in low tones, which, nevertheless, Nick could distinctly hear and understand, although they spoke in French; and now he instantly recognized both voices. He had not been mistaken in his suspicions of the man and woman. They were indeed Janice and Carruthers.

He discovered, too, that they had found him out.

He learned from that conversation that they had removed his wig, pulled off the eyebrows and the bristling mustache, and that he was revealed to them for what he really was—the detective who was on their track for the crimes they had committed.

"No, Livingston," the woman was saying, when Nick began to comprehend her words, "we must not put him entirely out of the way yet. You do not know exactly how many days it will be before the balloon is in readiness and we will be able to leave here, as we have planned. But when that time comes, the very last act before we take flight will be mine. I have one more knife left like the one I used on Radcliffe. I have saved it for Nick Carter. But until we are quite ready to depart, let him live."

"All right, Janice. Have it your own way; only if I had mine, I'd get rid of him now."

"No. Wait," she said.

CHAPTER IX.

A WOMAN TO BE FEARED.

It was evident that the two had just removed the disguise Nick had worn, when he became conscious of their presence near him and listened to their talk.

"He fooled me completely, Janice," Carruthers said, after a moment of silence, following upon the announcement of the extreme peril in which the detective was placed.

"So he did me, Liv. But I acted on the proposition [illegible] applying how her words should be interpreted. There was always the probability that such a man might be Nick Carter, or some one sent by him. He played his part well, but—there he is."

"I would rather put him out of the way at once, Janice," said Carruthers.

"And have his corpse lying around here in our way, till we are ready? No."

"Well, perhaps you are right. But I hate to leave a corpse here when we leave, too."

"We need not do that, either."

"You see, if we should kill him now, we could bury him out in the yard, and——"

"You talk like a fool, Liv. I know a much better way than that."

"How, then?"

"Why, we will take him in the basket with us when we make the ascension."

"Humph! Well?"

"And when we are three or four thousand feet in the air, we will drop him out. We won't know where he will alight, and whoever finds him afterward will not know where he came from."

"But suppose that even such a fall did not kill him, and that he should remain conscious long enough to tell all he knows."

"Liv, I begin to think, since that man has been on our track, that you are entering your second childhood. Where is your judgment and your nerve? You don't suppose that I intend to drop him out of that basket *alive*, do you?"

"Oh."

"We can knife him, or poison him, or kill him somehow. And I'll wager that when he is found after we have dropped him from the height of a mile or so, nobody will be particular about holding a post mortem over the remains. There won't be enough of them left."

"Janice, you're a genius."

"Now, Liv, how soon do you think you can get ready to leave?"

"I don't know exactly. With good luck, by this coming night. We'll have to leave in the night, you know."

"Yes. I am getting a bit nervous since Nick Carter found his way out here. There is no telling what directions he has left behind him. Can't we go to-day, in the daytime?"

"No; not before night, Janice."

"Well, work as you never worked before, in order to make it to-night, then. I would like to get started as soon after dark as possible."

"I think I can make it by midnight."

"Will the wind be right?"

"Yes. I think so. It is getting around toward the eastward now. There is likely to be some rain."

"Will that interfere at all?"

"No; only it will be uncomfortable until we rise above it."

"Well, it won't take long to do that."

"No."

"Meanwhile, see to it that you keep the detective drugged."

"Oh, I'll do that all right. The minute he shows signs of returning consciousness, he'll get another dose."

"I wouldn't wait for that. Shoot some of that dope into him now."

"What's the use? He's good for at least two more hours yet."

"What time is it now?"

"Half-past seven."

"Well, at half-past eight I will come out here again and see to it that you dose him. I will stay now if there is anything I can do to help you."

"No. There is not a thing you can do. I had hard enough work yesterday to find work for him to do. Only one can work at a time, with profit, here."

"Then I'll keep watch, as before."

"Yes. And say, when I went after the things at the corner, half an hour ago, I saw a fellow that looked like a hack-driver out for a holiday. He was standing around looking wise, and it struck me that he might be in the pay of Carter. Keep your eye out for him, Janice."

"A red-headed fellow, with hair like this wig here?"

"Yes."

"It is the same one I noticed yesterday. Leave him to me. I'll have a look at him."

They moved away then, and Nick heard them close and lock the door as they went out of the closetlike room wherein he was a prisoner; for he had already discovered that in addition to the drugs, he had been firmly bound and tied so that he could not have left the couch had he attempted to do so.

He wondered what they would do in the case of Dan Flagherty against whom their astuteness had already found occasion for suspicion.

Afterward he discovered, and it may as well be told here as demonstrating just how crafty and cautious [illegible] and daring Janice could be.

When she left the barn where the balloon was so nearly ready for use she returned to the house and prepared herself for the street.

placed her in some

Presently she went out, and hurried around the corner to the delicatessen-store that has already been referred to. To the German woman she said:

"There was a red-headed man in here yesterday, asking about my husband, wasn't there?"

"Ya, fraulein"—it was a delicate compliment to use the word fraulein in this case—"he was an Irisher looking for vork. You haf seen him already?"

"Yes. Was he alone?"

"Ya; by his lonesome."

Janice made a few purchases and went out again; but now she returned to the street on which the house was located, and walked slowly along it, past the house, and at last toward a red-headed man she observed in the distance, who happened to be no other than Flagherty.

She approached him at once, going directly to him and coming to a stop in front of him.

"Is any one following me?" she demanded, much to Dan's surprise. "I do not want to look back. Is any one observing us?"

"No, ma'am," replied Flagherty.

"If you see any one, warn me, because we must not be seen talking together. You understand, don't you?"

"Mebby I do, and ag'in mebby I don't, ma'am."

"I come from Mr. Carter."

"Oh! Faith, I guessed it."

"Of course you did."

"He said he would whistle. He didn't say anything about sendin' a lady out to me."

"He did not know that I was there. He was not sure."

"Oh; I see."

"You know the house where he has gone, do you?"

"Faith I dunno where he is, ma'am. He said as how I wasn't likely to see him this morning, but that I was to wait till I did see him, or until he signaled to me."

"Well, he sent me out to tell you—but, perhaps, you would take it better to go to the house and see him yourself. He said you could do that if you wanted to, because you are Irish and you might prefer to take your orders direct from him."

"Well, ma'am, savin' your presence, I would that."

"Then follow me—not too closely, mind—but follow me at a distance. I will turn in at the gate of that house, and after I have gone inside the door you must follow; that is if nobody is looking."

"And if there should be some one looking?"

"Wait until they have passed, and then enter. Go straight to the door and step through it, then turn

to the right and go into the parlor. You will find Mr. Carter there."

She turned away and retraced her steps without more words.

She had played her cards so well that she had roused all the curiosity that was in the Irishman, and he had not a thought of not doing as she directed.

And, therefore, after she had gone a short distance, he followed her slowly, presently passing in at the gate, and then up the steps and through the door where he turned to the right as he had been told to do.

But when he did so, something crashed down upon his head, and he plunged forward, face down upon the floor, senseless and helpless.

When he returned again to consciousness he was in a cot in a hospital, and upon inquiry he discovered that several days had elapsed since he was struck. He was told that he had been found unconscious in the street early in the morning—it must have been the day following the attack upon him, he thought—and had been taken to the hospital, where he had been unconscious so long a time that his case had greatly puzzled the doctors.

In fact, if we may anticipate the story by a little, that was just what had happened, and Flagherty never could understand it until he saw—but we won't anticipate quite to that extent, as yet.

It was an hour after Nick had overheard the conversation between Janice and Carruthers—the time when she had said she would return—when he heard her voice again, outside the door behind which he was lying bound and helpless.

"I have done for that fellow," he heard her say.

"What fellow?" asked Carruthers.

"The hack-driver."

"You don't mean that you have killed him?"

"No, fool; not that."

"Well, what have you done?"

"I cracked him on the back of his head with a heavy poker. It seemed just the right sort of implement for the purpose. He is senseless now, and I have shot a dose into him in addition to that which will keep him quiet for about twenty-four hours, if it doesn't kill him."

"You are sure that he was here with the detective?"

"Yes. The fool admitted it. I played with him."

"And what are you going to do with him now?"

"We will carry him around the corner and drop him in the gutter, before we leave here, to-night. Some policeman will find him, think it's a case of drunk, and have him carted off to a hospital. How are you getting on with your work?"

"Finely."

"You will be ready to-night?"

"Yes; by, if not before, midnight."

"Good. Now, isn't it time to dose the detective again?"

"I suppose so."

"Unlock the door, then. I want to see it done."

Then Nick heard them at the door, and presently it opened and they stood over him.

He thought then that it was time to speak to them, and he did so.

"Good morning, Janice; how are you, Carruthers?" he said, and smiled up at them.

"It will be 'good night' for yours, presently, Nick Carter," replied Janice coldly.

CHAPTER X.

A TALK WITH TWO BAD ONES.

"Where is the dose you are to give him, Livingston?" Janice asked, turning to her companion.

"I haven't prepared it yet," he replied. "I will get it."

He went out of the little room then, leaving them together; and Janice leaned against the door-jamb while she waited, eying Nick Carter coldly as she did so.

"You see what has come of it, don't you?" she asked him presently.

"What has come of what?" he replied.

"Of your fool-efforts against us in behalf of the law."

"Oh, I understand the present conditions quite well, if that is what you mean, Janice."

"Do you? Don't you realize also that it is you who are really responsible for the death of Radcliffe?"

"Well, no, I can't see it in just that way."

"He would be alive to-day if it were not for your officiousness, Nick Carter."

"Would he, indeed?"

"Yes. He had heard me talk about a balloon and about having found a place in Brooklyn. I was afraid to let him live, lest he would tell you. I suppose, as a matter of fact, that he had already told you, otherwise you could not have traced us here."

"On the contrary, he told me nothing about it."

"Well, it doesn't matter how you found us out, as long as you did so, and are now in our power."

"No, I don't really suppose it does."

"We are going to take you up in the balloon with us and drop you."

"So I heard you say."

"You did? When?"

"When you were in here an hour ago."

"Ah; you were conscious even then, were you?"

"Yes; otherwise I could not have overheard you, could I?"

"Oh, well, it doesn't matter. Do you think you can live through a plunge through space of a couple of miles?"

"You have gone up a mile since you referred to the subject the last time."

"Do you think you can live through it?"

"Men have been known to do so."

"But you won't; because you will be dead before we drop you."

"I heard you make that statement, also."

"I am rather sorry to do it, Nick Carter."

"Yes. You look it—and talk it."

"We are to leave here to-night."

"I have been informed as to that, also."

"Dear me, you are quite well informed, are you not? Did you also hear me say how I have disposed of your hack-driver?"

"Yes. I hope you won't hurt him any more than is necessary. He is quite harmless, and he doesn't even know who I was after when he brought me out here."

"I guessed that. You should have told him, for he might not then have fallen so easy a victim to my wiles."

"Will you tell me what you have done with Pauline?" asked the detective. "It can do no harm, since it is practically all over with me—from your standpoint."

"Oh, yes, I will tell you."

"Well?"

"We wanted her out of the way on general principles, so we arranged to get rid of her."

"Do you mean that you——"

"Murdered her? Oh, no; not that; although I imagine she would about as soon be dead as where she is."

"And where is that?"

"She is locked up with a lot of other insane persons, and she is there for a year—if she doesn't become quite mad by that time and so compel them to keep her longer."

"You have placed her in some private sanitarium?"

"Yes; and paid her keep for two years. I also intimated to the good doctor that if she should die before her time was expired, she would not be missed. He seemed to appreciate the suggestion."

"What a terrible woman you are, Janice!"

"Am I not. But, you see, I hate that girl. She has always been in my way. She is too good for this world, but Carruthers has some foolish scruples about killing her, or letting me do it, so we compromised in this way."

"Have you no pity in your heart?"

"For such as she is? No; not an atom."

"You are rather a dangerous person to those you happen to dislike, Janice."

"I am that, as your friend, the hackman, would say. What a pity it is, Nick Carter, that you are so dyed-in-the-wool goody-goody."

"Why, Janice?"

"Well, I rather like you."

"Indeed! I suppose I ought to feel highly complimented."

"Oh, I don't know. Take it as you please. I only know that I would give a good deal if Carruthers had a little of your sand and go."

"He ought to have plenty of it. His father was one of the nerviest men I ever knew."

"Maybe so; Carruthers doesn't seem to have inherited it to any very great extent. Now, you—why, if I had some one like you for a partner, I could win the world!"

"Am I to understand that you are making me a proposition?" asked Nick, smiling at her.

"No. You are not. You are said to be a man of your word, but I wouldn't believe you even if you should accept such a proposal from me; even if I thought you meant it when you agreed to it."

"I don't think you need give yourself any unnecessary uneasiness on that point. I am not likely to make you any promises."

"Oh, I know that. You are too goody-goody. Say, what do you get out of it, anyway?"

"Lots of things, Janice."

"Tell me what they are. It must be really funny to be so good."

"Well, there is ease of conscience, for one thing."

"Pooh! A fig for that!"

"Contentment of spirit."

"Nonsense. I can find that in other ways."

"Well, I have made considerable money at my pro-

fession. I suppose that will appeal to you, won't it?"

"It sounds rather more to the point; but you got it by hunting others down."

"Possibly; but those others deserved hunting down. I feel right now, Janice, that I shall live to hunt you down, if it happens that you escape me this time."

"Well, you won't! You can bank your pile on that, mister. You will be dead when we drop you from the basket, and I shall see to it that you have at least a thousand feet to fall—perhaps two or three of them."

"Even so, I don't believe this to be the last of our experiences."

"You will sing a different song when I get you up in the air."

"We are not up in the air—yet."

"No; but we will be."

"The roof isn't off of the barn, yet."

"No; but it will be."

"There is many a slip between the cup——"

"Speaking of cups," said Carruthers, entering at that moment, "I have one here which contains a dose for you, Carter. And in my other hand I have a gun, loaded with about the same material which I will make use of in case you object to swallowing your drink. Now which will it please you to take?"

"What is the difference between them?"

"Well, if I were personally to choose which I would take, I should select the contents of the cup. The after effects are less unpleasant."

"I suppose it's got to be one or the other. I can't offer any objection to the hypodermic. You could use that, no matter how hard I should struggle."

"Sure."

"All right. Give me the cup."

"Now, I call that spoken rather sensibly."

"But I wish you would wait just a minute, if you will. There are two or three questions I would like to ask you."

"What are they? Anything to oblige, you know."

"I have asked Janice where she has placed Pauline, and she will tell me only that it is a sanitarium. I would like to know where it is located."

"Why?"

"Because when I escape from your clutches I should like to know where to find her."

"Carter, you certainly *are* amusing. You don't suppose there is any chance for you to escape, do you?"

"While there is life—you know the rest."

"But in this case hope lies dead and shattered."

"Nevertheless, where is she?"

"I remember," said Carruthers, "that when I searched you, I found among other things, a note-book in one of your waistcoat pockets. I will pause in my professional duties long enough to write her present address in that book. If you escape, that book will doubtless go with you. If you do not, you can refer to it after you get to the other world, if that happens to be your destination."

He reached down and removed the book, in which he wrote with apparent care an address, and to that Nick thought he added other words, but he did not ask.

"Now, is there anything else?" Carruthers asked, replacing the book.

"Yes. Aren't you afraid that Janice will some day get tired of you?"

For a moment Carruthers stared, but Janice laughed aloud, and he joined with her.

"Because, if she should," continued Nick, "I wouldn't give a picayune for your life after that happened."

"You are really quite original in your ideas, Carter," Carruthers drawled, lazily.

"You haven't answered the question."

"It isn't necessary, my dear sir. She is tired of me already. She would trade me off for you right now, if you were made a little bit differently in your conscience. But, you see, Janice doesn't wish to be quite rid of me, although there is no telling what may happen in the times to come. But we have got quite a competence now. We are going to enjoy the fruits of that half-million—it will go a good ways in other countries, you know—and live the simple life until it is gone. Then we will lay our plans for other worlds to conquer. Until then I think I may feel quite safe, thanks to you for the suggestion, just the same. And now, if you will be so kind and considerate as to swallow this potion without giving me any more of your ideas on matrimony and other things, I'll be obliged."

And he bent forward with the cup in his hand.

CHAPTER XI.

NO HONOR AMONG THIEVES.

Nick Carter swallowed the draft that was given to him by Carruthers because he regarded the act as the easiest way out of a difficulty.

He knew perfectly well that if he refused to do so Carruthers would at once plunge the needle of the hypodermic into his arm or leg, and that the result would be the same.

And after he had swallowed it and the two persons so intent upon his utter undoing had left him, which they did at once, he set himself to using his will in a great effort to fight off the effects of the drug if it were possible to do so.

He knew, of course, that he could not hope entirely to overcome it; but he did believce that by earnest, consistent and continued effort he could lessen the effect, perhaps to a considerable degree.

In this idea it was proven eventually that he was correct.

For the better part of half an hour after they left him he retained his consciousness.

It is true that at times he almost lost himself in the overpowering desire to sleep that came upon him, but his great force of will stood him in good stead now, and he knew that he was conquering partly if not wholly.

He wondered if Carruthers had figured that he had given the detective enough of the drug to keep him unconscious until it should be time to inflate and release the balloon, and so wondering he at last fell into a deep sleep.

Of the hours that passed then, while he slumbered, he, of course, had no recollection.

The first thing concerning which he was really conscious thereafter was when he was startled into consciousness by a cold rush of air in his face, and he opened his eyes to see that the door of the little room had been opened, that standing upon the threshold with her back toward him, because she had turned to reply to a question addressed to her by Carruthers, was Janice.

But he could look beyond her also.

He could see that the roof of the barn had been raised and drawn aside.

He could see, in apertures through that space so made, stars twinkling in the heavens.

But there seemed to be a great black blot which almost filled the space, and he suddenly remembered what it was.

It was the great balloon that had been inflated and which was now, therefore, ready for its flight.

He could see it as it swayed, tugging at the ropes that held it. He could see Carruthers darting hither and thither carrying things which he deposited in the basket.

It was plain to him, then, that he had been sleeping a long time, and that during the interval his enemies had completed their arrangements for their final escape.

He had no idea as to what they had planned their destination to be, however, or what their plans comprehended after once they were free of the environment of New York.

And he smiled grimly to himself when he remembered his own utterly helpless condition and the fate that was in store for him if Carruthers and Janice succeeded in carrying out their intentions.

He tried now, fiercely, while Janice's back was toward him, to break his bonds; to tear himself free from the cords that held him; even to stretch the ropes that held him so tightly.

But every effort was unavailing.

Presently Janice turned and came over to his side, bending down to look upon him; but he closed his eyes and pretended to be still immersed in slumber.

"Livingston," he heard her say at last, "give me the hypodermic. I'll shoot the contents of it into his arm. It will be just as well to make sure that he cannot awake too soon."

"What if he should, Janice? He can't get away."

"No; but he might call out, you know."

"Well, let him; there is nobody here to hear him, is there?"

"Nevertheless, give me the gun."

"I can't, Janice, for the very good reason that it is packed. If you wish to get down into all those things again, why, do it. I don't want to. I have got too many other things to attend to."

"Oh, very well. I guess he will do as he is."

"Leave the man alone. It won't do any harm if he does wake up. He can't escape now, and we'll be off in another five minutes."

"All right."

She went out of the little room again to assist her husband in his work, and again the detective could use his eyes without fear of being seen.

He watched them as they worked.

He saw them arrange a large box that was packed with inflammable materials, and he knew that they were planning to fire the buildings as soon as they took their leave.

"How is the wind?" he heard Janice ask, and Carruthers replied:

"It could not be better for our purposes."

"When you are ready you must give me five min-

ites to run into the house and set off the slow match there," she added; and he promised that he would.

Finally the moment came when Carruthers turned to Janice and remarked:

"There. I think I am ready for the live stock now. We will pack Carter away next. How far do you want to carry him before you drop him?"

"Oh, a good big distance," she replied. "I don't want him found anywhere around here. My hope is that when the body is found it will either be unrecognizable, or that it will be buried as an unknown before his identity can be discovered."

"Well, we ought to travel at a very good rate in this wind. I figure that it is blowing twelve or fifteen miles an hour. Probably it is much fresher a little higher up."

They entered the little room together, and while Janice, who seemed to be almost as strong as a man, seized the detective by his feet, Carruthers took his head; and so they lifted him and bore him out of the room and upon the platform of boxes that Carruthers had arranged beside the balloon basket.

They laid him down there for a moment, while Carruthers climbed into the basket; and then they lowered him into it, and he was presently deposited on a blanket in the bottom of it, still as helpless as if he had been dead, but still pretending to be unconscious, although every sense he had was upon the alert.

"Now," said Carruthers, when that was accomplished, "go into the house and touch off your fuse. How long will it burn, do you think, before it starts the fire?"

"Oh, the better part of half an hour," she replied, starting away.

It was then, the instant that she disappeared, when Carruthers did a wholly unlooked for thing—committed a wholly unexpected act.

He bent down and seized Nick Carter, attempting to raise him from the bottom of the basket, it being evidently his intention to throw the detective out of it.

But something caught and held him. The ropes with which Nick was bound had somehow got caught, and Carruthers could not lift him.

He tugged manfully for a moment, cursed a little, and then desisted in the effort, for he dropped the detective with a crash to the bottom of the basket again and leaped out of it, knife in hand.

Nick saw him and understood instantly what the man had intended to do, and was now attempting.

He meant, if he could, to desert Janice. He had planned for this opportunity to throw the detective out and to escape alone in the balloon with the treasure, which Nick had no doubt was there; that treasure of half a million in money and jewels that they had stolen from the diamond merchant.

But, finding that he could not rid himself of the detective in time, the man was still determined to make his escape from Janice, and, since it was impossible to rid himself of the detective in time, to take him with him.

He had cut one of the ropes, and had his knife on the other one ready to slash, when Janice must have appeared, although Nick could not see her from the position he occupied.

But he heard Carruthers utter an exclamation and saw him when he leaped into the basket, and then he could see the man as he leaned far over the side of it, evidently reaching down with his knife to cut away the one detaining rope which still held.

Nick heard Janice cry out; he heard Carruthers swear.

There was a sudden jar against the basket, as if the woman had sprung forward against it and seized upon it.

Then there came a swift rush of air and a careening motion that told Nick that the balloon had shot upward and away from its confining ropes.

"Has Janice been left behind?" Nick Carter asked himself; and then, as if in answer to his question, the loud report of a pistol sounded almost directly above him and Carruthers staggered back against Nick, stumbled and fell over him.

He almost instantly recovered himself, however, though not quick enough to avoid the consequences of what he had attempted to do, for at that instant Nick could see the head and shoulders and one arm of Janice as they appeared over the edge of the basket.

The arm was extended straight out while she somehow clung in her perilous position with the other one; and the hand thus revealed contained a pistol which never wavered in its steady aim.

And Janice was laughing, laughing wildly, as if in a sort of frenzied glee.

"So!" she cried out, clinging like a fly where she was. "You thought to give me the slip at the last moment, did you? Lie down in the bottom of the basket there, beside Carter, or I will send another bullet into you. That's right. Turn over on your face. Now put your hands up over your head. I can keep you covered and climb into the basket at the same time."

She thought she could, but she could not.

It was necessary that she should use both hands to get into the basket, and she had to take the chance of releasing her hold entirely upon the revolver in order to do so.

Nick could see her every act from where he was lying, and he realized this necessity as fully as she did. He wondered how it would all end.

He saw her draw herself up gradually, as far as she could, and then wait; and then he heard her speak sharply to Carruthers, who had evidently attempted to turn. Why she did not shoot him again Nick could not guess, but doubtless she had her own reasons. It

developed later when it was discovered that she had used the only cartridge that the revolver contained.

Nick saw her at last drop the pistol to the inside of the basket and then with a valiant effort throw herself bodily across the edge of it and precipitate herself forward into it.

But even as she did so Carruthers started up again.

It was evident that he had been waiting for this moment. Possibly he realized what his ultimate fate would be if she ever succeeded in getting entirely inside the basket again.

At all events he struggled to his feet, although it was evident that he was severely wounded by the first bullet she had fired into him.

He reached her before she could get far enough into the basket to have the free use of her hands, and he sought with all the strength that remained to him to thrust her out of it again so that she would fall to the earth, which by now should have been and doubtless was many hundred feet below them.

But the woman seemed to be stronger than the man now.

She gained against his efforts inch by inch, and although he struck her repeatedly in the face with his bare knuckles she seemed not to mind it in the least, but to struggle on instead with indomitable perseverance and pluck.

CHAPTER XII.

TRAGEDY IN A BALLOON.

Inch by inch the woman gained upon the man.

It had never been Nick Carter's lot to gaze upon such a struggle as that one.

He realized from the character of the air he was breathing that they had already attained a considerable height. He was utterly helpless so far as movement of his own was concerned. There was nothing that he could do but watch the conflict and wonder how it would terminate.

It could not make much difference to him how it ended, he remembered.

Whoever won the battle would be all the more determined to be rid of him, finally, because of it.

At last Carruthers, his strength spent, weakened by the loss of blood from his bullet-wound and finding little to resuscitate or sustain him in the rarified air he was breathing fell backward into the basket, dragging Janice with him to the bottom of it.

She fell on top of him, crushing him with her weight, and Nick could hear the man groan, although the sound of it seemed to come from a far distance, so difficult is it to hear in such a place where there is nothing to give back the sound of your voice.

But if Carruthers was almost spent, so was Janice.

Indeed when she fell with her body atop of her husband, suddenly turned her foe, she made no attempt to rise.

She remained where she was, appearing not to struggle, but merely reaching out her right hand, and, with the fingers of it, grasping the throat of her adversary; and she held the hand there, squeezing with all the strength that remained in it, and shutting off, as far as it was in her power to do it, what little air he could find at that high altitude.

So they remained for so long a time that Nick began to think that both had fainted, or were dead, because of the struggle.

With him it was becoming difficult to breathe, and he felt certain that the temperature must be far below the freezing point.

Then he tried to speak to Janice, but he found that he could not utter a note that she could hear; indeed, he could scarcely hear the sound of his own voice.

But at last she rolled over; and, when she did so, Nick saw that Carruthers had become quite unconscious if he were not already dead.

Nick was afraid then that Janice would look toward him and discover that he was conscious of all that was happening, so he half-closed his eyes, peering between the lids, however.

He saw her reach for the rip rope where it dangled into the basket; or was it the valve-cord? He could not tell. He did not know enough about the arrangement of the balloon.

He saw her give it a jerk; and, even as she did so, a shudder ran through her and she closed her eyes.

Nick wondered if she had also been wounded in that struggle, but he could not see well enough in his enforced position to determine.

Of one thing he was assured, however; really of two things. The first was that she had suddenly become quite unconscious, and the other was that the balloon had responded to her pull upon the cord and was descending.

He tried with all the strength he could muster to roll over, and he succeeded in getting upon his side.

He saw then that Carruthers held a knife in his hand—it was the same knife with which he had been engaged in cutting the balloon loose at the moment he was surprised by the return of Janice, and because of the position in which Carruthers had fallen, the blade of it was sticking straight upward, and, although the man was unconscious, it seemed as if the knife was held stiffly in position, probably owing to the fact that Carruthers' arm was partly bent under him.

Nick remembered in that instant that Janice had fallen atop of him, when they both dropped into the basket from its edge, and he wondered if she had fallen upon that upturned blade. If so, it explained her sudden cessation of effort after pulling the valve-rope.

But the upturned blade meant more than that to Nick Carter.

It meant liberty, if only he could reach it in time, reach it before one of the two could recover from the swoons into which they had fallen.

He began to edge his way along the bottom of the basket, toward that knife.

He could make only an inch at each effort, but that was something, and he knew that if he were given time enough he could accomplish it.

He could bend his legs at the knees; the ropes that bound him did not prevent that; and at last he succeeded in turning himself around so that by lifting his legs he could reach them toward the upturned knife.

By continued and great effort he finally brought himself into a position where he could get the rope that held his ankles, in contact with the blade of the knife, and finally strand by strand he managed to cut through those confining bonds.

His legs were free at last; but his hands were still bound together, and they were tied behind his back.

But he could move about, now that his legs were free, and it did not take him very long to get into a position where he could reach the blade of the knife with his bound wrists.

And then he sawed and sawed, sometimes cutting gashes into his flesh, but often cutting the rope that confined him—and at last it fell away.

He was free.

He looked over the side of the basket into the void beneath him, and far, far below him he could see a blur of lights which he thought must be those of a city. He tried to judge of their distance above the earth, and guessed at it roughly as about a thousand feet.

Then, having regained his breath and his poise in a measure, he turned his attention to the two unconscious forms in the basket.

He gave his attention to Janice first, and discovered that she was breathing faintly; and, inasmuch as in that cursory examination he could discover no wound, he naturally supposed that she had only fainted from the violence of the struggle she had been through, and from the effect of the high altitude they had attained before she succeeded in pulling the valve-rope.

He left her as she was and turned his attention to Carruthers.

But he discovered almost at once that Carruthers was dead.

The bullet fired by Janice, before she entered the basket, and while she was attempting to climb into it, had been fatal.

True the man had lived long enough to make a desperate fight for his life, but he had succumbed at last. He was dead.

While Nick was feeling about the body to discover if the heart was still beating, he came upon a wallet in the breast pocket of the man's coat; and this he found to be stuffed with bills of large denomination.

It was undoubtedly a large part of the plunder—the cash part of it—that had been taken from Abrams' safe.

And over at one side of the square basket he had already seen a box which he had no sort of doubt contained the jewels.

Nick disposed of the body of Carruthers as best he could at one side of the basket, covering it with the blanket upon which he had been lying himself, and then he gave his attention again to Janice.

Or, rather, to be correct, he started to do so when he found that the balloon needed his attention.

He had not realized it until that moment, but they had been descending rapidly when he had looked out before, and he was suddenly brought to a realization of his present peril by the fact that the balloon corromed against the top of a tall tree and bounded away again into another one.

Nick was thrown violently to one side, and the basket of the balloon was nearly overturned; and Nick, recovering his balance, seized upon a bag of ballast and threw it out into the night.

Another followed it, and then the balloon shot upward for a few feet; but, just as Nick thought they were safe again, they crashed squarely into the top of a monster oak, the basket was overturned, and its contents were thrown out into the branches of the tree, and he found himself caught in a crotch between the trunk and one of the limbs, where he was held, as if in a vise, and without injury more than a terrific shaking.

The detective doesn't remember very clearly just how he managed to climb down out of that tree. He does know that when he reached the ground he found that he was close to a house and that he presently managed to arouse the occupants who came outside to his assistance.

With lanterns they searched beneath the tree and found there everything that the basket had contained; indeed, part of the basket itself was there, wrecked by its contact with the tree; but the balloon had disappeared, and possibly it is still going.

The body of Carruthers was there; and so was the body of Janice, for she was quite dead; although she had sustained no wound in the fight with her husband, her neck had been broken when the balloon was wrecked, and so her career of crime was brought to a close.

The box which contained all the stolen diamonds and jewelry belonging to Abrams was also found there, and upon the two dead bodies all the money, save a little more than two thousand dollars, was discovered.

And now it only remains to be said that late the following day Nick remembered the memoranda that Carruthers had made in the note-book in his waistcoat pocket, and he looked for and found it.

It contained the address of the sanitarium where Pauline had been confined, and underneath it Carruthers had written: "If you live to read this I want you to know that I don't intend that she shall remain there long. L. C."

She did not, either, for Nick had her freed at once.

THE END.

The next number, 610, will contain "Nick Carter's Strangest Case; or, The Hacienda Plot."

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THE DEFENSE OF THE PAY-MONEY.

By J. M. OXLEY.

Just why Mr. Allison, superintendent of the big cotton-mills at High Falls, chose Louis Nutter out of the clamorous crowd of youngsters applying for the place of office-boy was not entirely clear to himself.

There were bigger boys than Louis among the applicants, and, so far as appearances went, brighter ones, too.

The [illegible] showed signs of long usage, and there was a strong, quiet expression on the boy's face that drew out Mr. Allison's liking. It inspired confidence. Louis looked trustworthy, and a somewhat troubled experience with boys that were not to be relied upon led the superintendent, almost unconsciously, to make trustworthiness the first consideration in filling the position.

The way in which Louis went about his work fully justified Mr. Allison's instinctive preference for him. He never waited to be told to do anything that fell within the range of his duties, and he was always on the alert for the opportunity to be of service in new ways, while his instructions were uniformly carried out with intelligent accuracy.

More than this, from the very start he took to deep a personal interest in what was going on around him as if he were a partner instead of the contrary. Without being overassertive, he managed to pick up many points as to the details of the work in the office, and about the mill, from some of the hands who had been there for years.

By the end of his second year he had been advanced to a junior clerkship, and there was another office-boy, who did not give him quite one-half the satisfaction that he had given.

Every alternate Friday the hands received their pay, and the getting ready of the money meant a night's work for Mr. Allison and two of the clerks.

The first operation was the counting of dollars, and drawn [illegible] the bank in small kits and offers, and then put up in [illegible] packages, each bearing the name of an employee, the [illegible] Saturday evening when the mill closed.

The getting ready of these envelopes always took several hours of hard work on the preceding night.

One Thursday night in February, when a wild storm of wind and snow was raging outside, Mr. Allison and the cashier, with Louis as their assistant, were busy until close on to midnight preparing the pay-money.

At last the tiresome task was finished, and the superintendent said to the cashier:

"You needn't stay any longer, Mr. Allan; I've a short letter to write before I go."

Glad to be relieved, Mr. Allan hurried off; but Louis remained, although Mr. Allison, engrossed with his letter, seemed to have quite forgotten him.

The pay-envelopes, neatly arranged in drawers made for the purpose, had been put into the safe-vault, but the big iron door of the vault still stood open.

Waiting for the order to go, but not venturing to interrupt Mr. Allison, Louis sat still on a chair and watched the minute-hand of the clock creep slowly around the white face. So silent was the office that he could hear his own heart-beats almost as clearly as the ticking of the clock.

Presently he fell into a light doze, from which he was suddenly awakened by some person reaching past him to snatch up Mr. Allison's revolver, that lay on the table at his elbow.

He gave a cry of alarm as he saw standing over him a large man, whose face was so closely muffled that only his nose and eyes were visible.

"Hold up your hands!" commanded the intruder, covering Mr. Allison with his own revolver.

The superintendent sprang from his chair, and, being entirely defenseless, wisely did as he was bid.

"Now, then, sonny," ordered the man gruffly, "just hand over that pay-money, and be quick about it."

Louis looked questioningly at Mr. Allison, in whose brain a scheme for the protection of the money was being rapidly evolved.

"I'll get it, Louis," said the superintendent, in a voice whose steadiness surprised himself and completely deceived the would-be robber.

Going quietly to the vault, Mr. Allison stepped inside, and drew the door to, at the same moment calling to Louis:

"Shut it and turn the handle."

Like a flash Louis obeyed. The heavy iron door closed with a clang, and the click of the combination-knob told that it was securely locked.

Now, the superintendent had reasoned that, when thus foiled of his expected plunder, the rascal would not think it worth his while to do any harm to the boy, except, perhaps, to assail him with profane abuse.

But, unfortunately, he did not know his man. Mike Cregan had pinned himself for this attempt upon the pay-money with sufficient bad whiskey to render him utterly reckless, and, in the fury of his anger at the success of the superintendent's stratagem, he leveled the revolver at Louis and fired.

The bullet entered the boy's shoulder, and, frenzied with fright, he made a dash for the door leading into the private office, which was in darkness.

Thither Cregan followed, trying to get another shot, and Louis, though the blood was pouring from his wound, darted out of the office, and through a long passage into a great room crowded with looms.

Past these he flew, the robber at his heels, and then through a door into another big room, part of which was vacant, and part occupied with more looms.

At one side of this room a gas-jet burned faintly, and, taking [illegible]ght by this, Cregan fired again.

With the crack of the revolver poor Louis pitched forward under a bench, where he lay prone, and to all appearances dead.

Satisfying himself that his victim would give him no further trouble, Cregan returned to the main office and endeavored to open the door of the vault. But his utmost ef-

forts were in vain. Louis had effectually operated the lock, and there was no budging the bolts.

Foiled in this direction, he tried another way. Having showered abuse and profanity upon the superintendent inside, who did not deign to make any response, he sought to frighten him into opening the door, which, as a matter of fact, Mr. Allison was as powerless to do as Cregan himself.

"If ye won't come out of that I'll roast you alive in there—that I will!" he shouted, and, the threat having no effect, he proceeded to light wisps of paper and hold them to the crack of the door so that the flame might show through and the smell of burning find its way in.

Mr. Allison's mental sufferings may be easily imagined. Utterly unable to effect his own deliverance, he had before him the awful prospect of death by suffocation if the robber should set the mill on fire.

In the meantime a strange thing had been happening in the part of the building to which Cregan chased Louis. A few minutes after the scoundrel had gone back to the office the seemingly dead boy stirred.

By a happy chance the last bullet, though it lodged in his head, had not reached his brain. The wound was a severe one, but not fatal.

Raising himself to his knees, Louis wiped the blood from his face, and looked anxiously about him. Cregan had disappeared, and all was silent, save for the beating of the storm against the windows.

"I must find Jackson," the boy murmured. "He'll be in the boiler-room."

The boiler-room, in which a fireman remained on duty all night, was away off in another part of the mill, and to reach it Louis would have to traverse a long, dark hall, descend a steep flight of stairs, cross the carpenter's shop and tool-room, and thence make his way through a covered passage to where Jackson would be found.

Weak from much loss of blood, and suffering agony from his wounds, how was this to be done?

So dizzy and faint was he that he could not stand erect—he would have to crawl upon his hands and knees. Yet all this did not overwhelm him.

Glancing fearfully back in the direction of the office, he began his tedious, painful journey.

The darkness did not trouble him. On the contrary, it was welcome, for it would hide him from Cregan if the villain again sought to attack him.

But the splinters from the well-worn floor got into his hands and pierced his knees, and his weakness was so great that he had to rest every few yards to recruit his strength.

It was a terrible test of a boy's pluck and endurance, and Louis himself never quite understood how he proved equal to it.

Little by little he dragged himself onward through the halls, and down the stairs, across the shops, and finally along the passageway, until at last, completely exhausted, he appeared before the astonished fireman.

Jackson was a man quick to understand, and a few words sufficed to make the situation clear to him.

Bathing Louis' wounds with cold water, and binding them up as best he could, he placed him tenderly on a bench, pillowing his head with his coat; and then, picking up a heavy iron poker, said:

"You stay quietly there, Louis; I'll see to the robber."

Louis nodded assent, and Jackson went out, slipping softly through the different parts of the great building until he reached the office door. Here he paused and peeped warily in. Cregan was kneeling on the floor in front of the vault, burning wisps of paper so that the flame and smoke might find their way through the crack of the door.

As it happened, Jackson was wearing rubbers on his feet, and with noiseless steps he crept crouchingly toward Cregan, his approach concealed by a long counter, until he was within striking distance.

Then, suddenly rising to his full height, he brought the heavy poker down with fearful force upon the robber's head, felling him senseless to the floor.

"Take that for your villainy," he cried, as he struck, and no second blow was needed.

Seizing some stout cord that was at hand, he bound Cregan's hands and feet beyond the possibility of his breaking free, and then he turned his attention to the superintendent.

"Mr. Allison," he shouted, standing close by the vault door, "are you all right, sir?"

"Oh, Jackson, is that you?" replied Mr. Allison, in a tone of unspeakable relief. "Is the robber still there?"

"He is, sir," responded Jackson, "but he's tied up so tight he can't do any more mischief."

Mr. Allison then directed him to go for the cashier, who would be able to open the door, and Jackson hurried off.

He soon returned with the cashier, who busied himself at the combination lock, while Jackson made haste back to Louis.

He found him fallen from the bench, and at first thought he was dead; but the dashing of cold water into his face soon revived him, and when his eyes opened again they fell upon Mr. Allison, who was looking down at him with an expression of affectionate concern.

Thanks to sound health and a strong constitution, Louis in due time recovered from his injuries. His heroic conduct won him universal praise, and Mr. Allison testified his gratitude by giving him an improved position in the office. Cregan received fitting punishment for his villainy. He seemed quite to repent of having shot Louis.

"Sure, if it wasn't for the drink, I'd never have put a bullet in the boy," he said, in extenuation of his action.

KILLING DEVILFISH.

The task of hitting a devilfish from a fourteen foot boat was left to the bachelor of the party, the married member explaining that he felt his duty to the ones at home excluded him from anything that smacked so of suicide. Accordingly, when near the next fish, the skiff put out from the stern of the *Irene*, the spearman standing in the bow while the skipper stood the big boat away so as to give the fish a clear field at the first rush.

The plan developed perfectly—the throw was good, the fish had filled the boat with his first splash, and then rushed away in a great swinging circle, so that in fifteen minutes it was possible for the sloop to cut across and catch up, when by some maneuvering it became possible to pass the inboard end of the line up to her bowsprit. After that it was a fight to a finish, with the devilfish on one end of the line and the ten-ton sloop on the other. For a long while it seemed as though the devilfish had the better of it. He towed that big boat steadily out into the Gulf for three hours and twenty minutes. It was exactly like being in tow of a fair-sized tug. The progress of the boat was not fast, but as steady as if it were being driven by the *Irene's* own engines.

It may be fair to remark that killing a devilfish entails as much genuine, muscle-racking hard work as any task on earth. It is much the same as pulling for hours against a yoke of oxen who are moving off entirely indifferent to one's futile efforts. The devilfish will not let simple towing tire him. If left to himself he will sound to bottom, and after resting proceed on *ad infinitum*. It is to prevent such resting that one must work constantly by hauling the tow in close to him, thereby frightening him to constant effort. If he can be strained to the point of weakening, then he may be hauled close enough to harpoon again.

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